



# DELHI UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Cl. No. 0 : 3 M5922 G6

Ac. No. 19633

2 JAN 1978 Date of issue for loan

This book should be returned on or before the date last stamped below. An overdue charge of 5 Paise will be collected for each day the book is kept overtime.

---



**Methuen's Modern Classics**

**THE RELUCTANT DRAGON**

*And Other Stories from*

*"The Golden Age" and "Dream Days"*

## METHUEN'S MODERN CLASSICS

EDITED BY E. V. Rieu

Crown 8vo. 1s 6d. each

THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS. By Kenneth Grahame. *Thirteenth School Edition.*

THE BLUE BIRD. By Maurice Maeterlinck. *Sixth School Edition.*

WHITE FANG By Jack London. *Abridged Ninth School Edition.*

SPANISH GOLD By George A Birmingham. *Abridged. Second School Edition*

FIFTEEN STORIES. By W. W. Jacobs.

MILESTONES. By Arnold Bennett and Edward Knoblock, and  
THE GREAT ADVENTURE By Arnold Bennett. *In one volume Fifth Edition*

ESSAYS BY MODERN MASTERS, Hilaire Belloc, G K Chesterton, E V Lucas, Robert Lynd, and A A Milne. *Eighth Edition.*

MORE ESSAYS BY MODERN MASTERS. Hilaire Belloc, G. K. Chesterton, E. V. Lucas, Robert Lynd, A. A. Milne, and J. B. Priestley.

ESSAYS OF A NATURALIST By Sir Ray Lankester. *Illustrated.*

THE GENTLEST ART · An Anthology of English Letters. By E. V. Lucas. *Abridged Second School Edition*

VERY YOUNG VERSES. By A A. Milne. 21 poems from 'When We Were Very Young,' and 'Now We Are Six' With 73 of the original illustrations by E H. Shepard. *Fourth Edition.* 2s.

TALES OF POOH By A. A. Milne. 8 self-contained stories from 'Winnie-the-Pooh' and 'The House at Pooh Corner.' With 87 of the original illustrations by E. H. Shepard *Third Edition.* 2s.

TOAD OF TOAD HALL. A Play from Kenneth Grahame's Book 'The Wind in the Willows.' By A A Milne *Third School Edition.*

A SHEPHERD'S LIFE. By W. H. Hudson. *Third School Edition.* 1s. 6d.

THE CHILDREN'S BLUE BIRD. By Georgette Leblanc. A simple narrative of the famous Play.

FOUR TALES. By Joseph Conrad. (The Brute, An Anarchist, The Duel, Il Conde )

THE MIRROR OF THE SEA. By Joseph Conrad. *Second School Edition.* 2s.

EDITED BY PETER WAIT

THE RELUCTANT DRAGON: And Other Stories from 'The Golden Age' and 'Dream Days.' By Kenneth Grahame.

SHORT STORIES BY MODERN MASTERS. H. C. Bailey, Arnold Bennett, G. A. Birmingham, Ernest Bramah, A. A. Milne, P. G. Wodehouse.

*Other Volumes to follow.*

*KENNETH GRAHAME*

THE  
RELUCTANT  
DRAGON

And Other Stories from  
THE GOLDEN AGE  
and  
DREAM DAYS



METHUEN & CO. LTD. LONDON  
*96 Essex Street, W.C.2*

*First published in this form in 1936*

**PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN**

## EDITOR'S NOTE

The purpose of this series is to reproduce some of the best contemporary and recent literature in a form and at a price suitable for educational purposes.

The stories in the present volume are taken from "THE GOLDEN AGE" and "DREAM DAYS." Though none has been abridged, a few have been excluded. Teachers in the past have found that the rather "Olympian" and retrospective atmosphere of some is beyond the understanding of children. Only those that seem to the editor to answer to this description have been left out.

P.W.





# CONTENTS

	PAGE
<i>from</i> THE GOLDEN AGE	
A HOLIDAY . . . . .	1
A WHITE-WASHED UNCLE . . . . .	9
ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS . . . . .	13
THE FINDING OF THE PRINCESS . . . . .	19
SAWDUST AND SIN . . . . .	26
THE BURGLARS . . . . .	31
SNOWBOUND . . . . .	38
WHAT THEY TALKED ABOUT . . . . .	43
THE ARGONAUTS . . . . .	47
THE ROMAN ROAD . . . . .	56
THE SECRET DRAWER . . . . .	64
THE BLUE ROOM . . . . .	70
<i>from</i> DREAM DAYS	
THE TWENTY-FIRST OF OCTOBER . . . . .	79
DIES IRÆ . . . . .	89
THE MAGIC RING . . . . .	99
A SAGA OF THE SEAS . . . . .	111
THE RELUCTANT DRAGON . . . . .	124



## A HOLIDAY

THE masterful wind was up and out, shouting and chasing, the lord of the morning. Poplars swayed and tossed with a roaring swish ; dead leaves sprang aloft, and whirled into space ; and all the clear-swept heaven seemed to thrill with sound like a great harp. It was one of the first awakenings of the year. The earth stretched herself, smiling in her sleep ; and everything leapt and pulsed to the stir of the giant's movement. With us it was a whole holiday ; the occasion a birthday—it matters not whose. Some one of us had had presents, and pretty conventional speeches, and had glowed with that sense of heroism which is no less sweet that nothing has been done to deserve it. But the holiday was for all, the rapture of awakening Nature for all, the various outdoor joys of puddles and sun and hedge-breaking for all. Colt-like I ran through the meadows, frisking happy heels in the face of Nature laughing responsive. Above, the sky was bluest of the blue ; wide pools left by the winter's floods flashed the colour back, true and brilliant ; and the soft air thrilled with the germinating touch that seems to kindle something in my own small person as well as in the rash primrose already lurking in sheltered haunts. Out into the brimming sun-bathed world I sped, free of lessons, free of discipline and correction, for one day at least. My legs ran of themselves, and though I heard my name called faint and shrill behind, there was no stopping for me. It was only Harold, I concluded, and his legs, though shorter than mine, were good for a longer spurt than this. Then I heard it called again, but this time more faintly, with a pathetic break in the middle ; and I pulled up short, recognizing Charlotte's plaintive note.

She panted up anon, and dropped on the turf beside me. Neither had any desire for talk ; the glow and the glory of existing on this perfect morning were satisfaction full and sufficient.

"Where's Harold ?" I asked presently.

"Oh, he's just playin' muffin-man, as usual," said Charlotte with petulance. "Fancy wanting to be a muffin-man on a whole holiday !"

It was a strange craze, certainly ; but Harold, who invented his own games and played them without assistance, always stuck staunchly to a new fad, till he had worn it quite out. Just at present he was a muffin-man, and day and night he went through passages and up and down staircases, ringing a noiseless bell and offering phantom muffins to invisible wayfarers. It sounds a poor sort of sport ; and yet—to pass along busy streets of your own building, for ever ringing an imaginary bell and offering airy muffins of your own make to a bustling thronging crowd of your own creation—there were points about the game, it cannot be denied, though it seemed scarce in harmony with this radiant wind-swept morning !

"And Edward, where is he ?" I questioned again.

"He's coming along by the road," said Charlotte. "He'll be crouching in the ditch when we get there, and he's going to be a grizzly bear and spring out on us, only you mustn't say I told you, 'cos it's to be a surprise."

"All right," I said magnanimously. "Come on and let's be surprised." But I could not help feeling that on this day of days even a grizzly felt misplaced and common.

Sure enough an undeniable bear sprang out on us as we dropped into the road ; then ensued shrieks, growlings, revolver-shots, and unrecorded heroisms, till Edward condescended at last to roll over and die, bulking large and grim, an unmitigated grizzly. It was an understood thing, that whoever took upon himself to be a bear must eventually die, sooner or later, even if he were the eldest born ; else, life would have been all strife and carnage, and the Age of Acorns have displaced our hard-won civilization. This

little affair concluded with satisfaction to all parties concerned, we rambled along the road, picking up the defaulting Harold by the way, muffinless now and in his right and social mind.

"What would you do?" asked Charlotte presently—the book of the moment always dominating her thoughts until it was sucked dry and cast aside,—“What would you do if you saw two lions in the road, one on each side, and you didn't know if they was loose or if they was chained up?”

“Do?” shouted Edward valiantly, “I should—I should—I should——” His boastful accents died away into a mumble. “Dunno what I should do.”

“Shouldn't do anything,” I observed after consideration; and, really, it would be difficult to arrive at a wiser conclusion.

“If it came to *doing*,” remarked Harold reflectively, “the lions would do all the doing there was to do, wouldn't they?”

“But if they was *good* lions” rejoined Charlotte, “they would do as they would be done by.”

“Ah, but how are you to know a good lion from a bad one?” said Edward. “The books don't tell you at all, and the lions ain't marked any different.”

“Why, there aren't any good lions,” said Harold hastily

“O yes, there are, heaps and heaps,” contradicted Edward. “Nearly all the lions in the story-books are good lions. There was Androcles' lion, and St. Jerome's lion, and—and—and the Lion and the Unicorn——”

“He beat the Unicorn,” observed Harold dubiously, “all round the town,”

“That *proves* he was a good lion,” cried Edward triumphantly. “But the question is, how are you to tell 'em when you see 'em?”

“I should ask Martha,” said Harold of the simple creed.

Edward snorted contemptuously, then turned to Charlotte. “Look here,” he said; “let's play at lions, anyhow, and I'll run on to that corner and be a lion,—I'll be two

lions, one on each side of the road,—and you'll come along, and you won't know whether I'm chained up or not, and that'll be the fun ! ”

“ No, thank you,” said Charlotte firmly ; “ you'll be chained up till I'm quite close to you and then you'll be loose, and you'll tear me in pieces, and make my frock all dirty, and p'raps you'll hurt me as well. *I know your lions !* ”

“ No, I won't, I swear I won't,” protested Edward. “ I'll be quite a new lion this time—something you can't imagine.” And he raced off to his post. Charlotte hesitated—then she went timidly on, at each step growing less Charlotte, the mummer of a minute and more the anxious Pilgrim of all time. The lion's wrath waxed terrible at her approach ; his roaring filled the startled air. I waited until they were both thoroughly absorbed, and then I slipped through the hedge out of the trodden highway, into the vacant meadow spaces. It was not that I was unsociable, nor that I knew Edward's lions to the point of satiety ; but the passion and the call of the divine morning were high in my blood Earth to earth ! That was the frank note, the joyous summons of the day ; and they could not but jar and seem artificial, these human discussions and pretences, when boon nature, reticent no more, was singing that full-throated song of hers that thrills and claims control of every fibre. The air was wine, the moist earth-smell wine, the lark's song, the wafts from the cowshed at top of the field, the pant and smoke of a distant train—all were wine—or song, was it ? or odour, this unity they all blent into ? I had no words then to describe it, that earth-effluence of which I was so conscious ; nor, indeed, have I found words since. I ran sideways, shouting ; I dug glad heels into the squelching soil ; I splashed diamond showers from puddles with a stick ; I hurled clods skyward at random, and presently I somehow found myself singing. The words were mere nonsense—irresponsible babble ; the tune was an improvisation, a weary, unrhymic thing of rise and fall : and yet it seemed to me

a genuine utterance, and just at that moment the one thing fitting and right and perfect. Humanity would have rejected it with scorn. Nature, everywhere singing in the same key, recognized and accepted it without a flicker of dissent.

All the time the hearty wind was calling to me companionably from where he swung and bellowed in the tree-tops. "Take me for guide to-day," he seemed to plead. "Other holidays you have tramped it in the track of the stolid, unswerving sun ; a belated truant, you have dragged a weary foot homeward with only a pale, expressionless moon for company To-day why not I, the trickster, the hypocrite ? I who whip round corners and bluster, relapse and evade, then rally and pursue ! I can lead you the best and rarest dance of any ; for I am the strong capricious one, the lord of misrule, and I alone am irresponsible and unprincipled, and obey no law." And for me, I was ready enough to fall in with the fellow's humour ; was not this a whole holiday ? So we sheered off together, arm-in-arm, so to speak ; and with fullest confidence I took the jugging, thwartwise course my chainless pilot laid for me. \*

A whimsical comrade I found him, ere he had done with me. Was it in jest, or with some serious purpose of his own, that he brought me plump upon a pair of lovers, silent, face to face o'er a discreet unwinking stile ? As a rule this sort of thing struck me as the most pitiful tomfoolery. Two calves rubbing noses through a gate were natural and right and within the order of things ; but that human beings, with salient interests and active pursuits beckoning them on from every side, could thus— ! Well, it was a thing to hurry past, shamed of face, and think on no more. But this morning everything I met seemed to be accounted for and set in tune by that same magical touch in the air ; and it was with a certain surprise that I found myself regarding these fatuous ones with kindness instead of contempt, as I rambled by, unheeded of them. There was indeed some reconciling influence abroad, which could bring the like



antics into harmony with bud and growth and the frolic air.

A puff on the right cheek from my wilful companion sent me off at a fresh angle, and presently I came in sight of the village church, sitting solitary within its circle of elms. From forth the vestry window projected two small legs, gyrating, hungry for foothold, with larceny—not to say sacrilege—in their every wriggle : a godless sight for a supporter of the Establishment. Though the rest was hidden, I knew the legs well enough ; they were usually attached to the body of Bill Saunders, the peerless bad boy of the village. Bill's coveted booty, too, I could easily guess at that ; it came from the Vicar's store of biscuits, kept (as I knew) in a cupboard along with his official trappings. For a moment I hesitated ; then I passed on my way. I protest I was not on Bill's side ; but then, neither was I on the Vicar's, and there was something in this immoral morning which seemed to say that perhaps, after all, Bill had as much right to the biscuits as the Vicar, and would certainly enjoy them better ; and anyhow it was a disputable point, and no business of mine. Nature, who had accepted me for ally, cared little who had the world's biscuits, and assuredly was not going to let any friend of hers waste his time in playing policeman for Society.

He was tugging at me anew, my insistent guide ; and I felt sure, as I rambled off in his wake, that he had more holiday matter to show me. And so, indeed, he had ; and all of it was to the same lawless tune. Like a black pirate flag on the blue ocean of air, a hawk hung ominous ; then, plummet-wise, dropped to the hedgrow, whence there rose, thin and shrill, a piteous voice of squealing. By the time I got there a whisk of feathers on the turf—like scattered playbills—was all that remained to tell of the tragedy just enacted. Yet Nature smiled and sang on, pitiless, gay, impartial. To her, who took no sides, there was every bit as much to be said for the hawk as for the chaffinch. Both were her children, and she would show no preferences.

Further on, a hedgehog lay dead athwart the path—nay,

more than dead ; decadent, distinctly ; a sorry sight for one that had known the fellow in more bustling circumstances. Nature might at least have paused to shed one tear over this rough-jacketed little son of hers, for his wasted aims, his cancelled ambitions, his whole career of usefulness cut suddenly short. But not a bit of it ! Jubilant as ever, her song went bubbling on, and "Death-in-Life"—and again, "Life-in-Death," were its alternate burdens. And looking round, and seeing the sheep-nibbled heels of turnips that dotted the ground, their hearts eaten out of them in frost-bound days now over and done, I seemed to discern, faintly, a something of the stern meaning in her valorous chant.

My invisible companion was singing also, and seemed at times to be chuckling softly to himself,—doubtless at thought of the strange new lessons he was teaching me ; perhaps, too, at a special bit of waggishness he had still in store. For when at last he grew weary of such insignificant earth-bound company, he deserted me at a certain spot I knew ; then dropped, subsided and slunk away into nothingness. I raised my eyes, and before me, grim and lichened, stood the ancient whipping-post of the village ; its sides fretted with the initials of a generation that scorned its mute lesson, but still clipped by the stout rusty shackles that had tethered the wrists of such of that generation's ancestors as had dared to mock at order and law. Had I been an infant Sterne, here was a grand chance for sentimental output ! As things were, I could only hurry homewards, my moral tail well between my legs, with an uneasy feeling, as I glanced back over my shoulder, that there was more in this chance than met the eye.

And outside our gate I found Charlotte, alone and crying. Edward, it seemed, had persuaded her to hide, in the full expectation of being duly found and ecstatically pounced upon ; then he had caught sight of the butcher's cart, and, forgetting his obligations, had rushed off for a ride. Harold, it further appeared, greatly coveting tadpoles, and top-heavy with the eagerness of possession, had fallen into the

pond. This, in itself, was nothing ; but on attempting to sneak in by the back-door, he had rendered up his duck-weed-bedabbled person into the hands of an aunt, and had been promptly sent off to bed ; and this, on a holiday, was very much. The moral of the whipping-post was working itself out ; and I was not in the least surprised when, on reaching home, I was seized upon and accused of doing something I had never even thought of. And my frame of mind was such, that I could only wish most heartily that I had done it.

## A WHITE-WASHED UNCLE

**I**N our small lives that day was eventful when another uncle was to come down from town, and submit his character and qualifications (albeit unconsciously) to our careful criticism. Earlier uncles had been weighed in the balance, and—alas!—found grievously wanting. There was Uncle Thomas—a failure from the first. Not that his disposition was malevolent, nor were his habits such as to unfit him for decent society; but his rooted conviction seemed to be that the reason of a child's existence was to serve as a butt for senseless adult jokes—or what, from the accompanying guffaws of laughter, appeared to be intended for jokes. Now, we were anxious that he should have a perfectly fair trial; so in the tool-house, between breakfast and lessons, we discussed and examined all his witticisms one by one, calmly, critically, dispassionately. It was no good! we could not discover any salt in them. And as only a genuine gift of humour could have saved Uncle Thomas—for he pretended to naught besides—he was reluctantly writ down a hopeless impostor.

Uncle George—the youngest—was distinctly more promising. He accompanied us cheerily round the establishment—suffered himself to be introduced to each of the cows—held out the right hand of fellowship to the pig—and even hinted that a pair of pink-eyed Himalayan rabbits might arrive—unexpectedly—from town some day. We were just considering whether in this fertile soil an apparently accidental remark on the solid qualities of guinea-pigs or ferrets might haply blossom and bring forth fruit, when our governess appeared on the scene. Uncle George's manner at once underwent a complete and contemptible change. His interest in rational topics seemed,

"like a fountain's sickening pulse," to flag and ebb away ; and though Miss Smedley's ostensible purpose was to take Selina for her usual walk, I can vouch for it that Selina spent her morning rattling, along with the keeper's boy and me ; while if Miss Smedley walked with any one, it would appear to have been with Uncle George.

But, despicable as his conduct had been, he underwent no hasty condemnation. The defection was discussed in all its bearings, but it seemed sadly clear at last that this uncle must possess some innate badness of character and fondness for low company. We who from daily experience knew Miss Smedley like a book—were we not only too well aware that she had neither accomplishments nor charms—no characteristic, in fact, but an inbred viciousness of temper and disposition ? True, she knew the dates of the English kings by heart ; but how could that profit Uncle George, who, having passed into the army, had ascended beyond the need of useful information ? Our bows and arrows, on the other hand, had been freely placed at his disposal ; and a soldier should not have hesitated in his choice a moment. No : Uncle George had fallen from grace, and was unanimously damned. And the non-arrival of the Himalayan rabbits was only another nail in his coffin. Uncles, therefore, were just then a heavy and lifeless market, and there was little inclination to deal. Still it was agreed that Uncle William, who had just returned from India, should have as fair a trial as the others ; more especially as romantic possibilities might well be embodied in one who had held the gorgeous East in fee.

Selina had kicked my shins—like the girl she is !—during a scuffle in the passage, and I was still rubbing them with one hand when I found that the uncle-on-approbation was half-heartedly shaking the other. A florid, elderly man, quite unmistakably nervous, he let drop one grimy paw after another, and, turning very red, with an awkward simulation of heartiness, "Well, h'are y'all ?" he said, "Glad to see me, eh ?" As we

could hardly, in justice, be expected to have formed an opinion on him at that early stage, we could but look at each other in silence ; which scarce served to relieve the tension of the situation. Indeed, the cloud never really lifted during his stay. In talking things over later, some one put forward the suggestion that he must at some time or other have committed a stupendous crime. But I could not bring myself to believe that the man, though evidently unhappy, was really guilty of anything ; and I caught him once or twice looking at us with evident kindness, though, seeing himself observed, he blushed and turned away his head.

When at last the atmosphere was clear of his depressing influence, we met despondently in the potato-cellar—all of us, that is, but Harold, who had been told off to accompany his relative to the station ; and the feeling was unanimous that, as an uncle, William could not be allowed to pass. Selina roundly declared him a beast, pointing out that he had not even got us a half-holiday ; and, indeed, there seemed little to do but to pass sentence. We were about to put it to the vote, when Harold appeared on the scene ; his red face, round eyes, and mysterious demeanour, hinting at awful portents. Speechless he stood a space : then, slowly drawing his hand from the pocket of his knickerbockers, he displayed on a dirty palm one—two—three—four half-crowns ! We could but gaze—tranced, breathless, mute. Never had any of us seen, in the aggregate, so much bullion before. Then Harold told his tale.

“ I took the old fellow to the station,” he said, “ and as we went along I told him all about the stationmaster’s family, and how I had seen the porter kissing our housemaid, and what a nice fellow he was, with no airs or affectation about him, and anything I thought would be of interest ; but he didn’t seem to pay much attention, but walked along puffing his cigar, and once I thought—I’m not certain, but I *thought*—I heard him say, ‘ Well, thank God, that’s over ! ’ When we got to the station he stopped suddenly, and said, ‘ Hold on a minute ! ’ Then he shoved

these into my hand in a frightened sort of way, and said; 'Look here, youngster! These are for you and the other kids. Buy what you like—make little beasts of yourselves—only don't tell the old people, mind! Now cut away home!' So I cut."

A solemn hush fell on the assembly, broken first by the small Charlotte. "I didn't know," she observed dreamily, "that there were such good men anywhere in the world. I hope he'll die to-night, for then he'll go straight to heaven!" But the repentant Selina bewailed herself with tears and sobs, refusing to be comforted; for that in her haste she had called this white-souled relative a beast.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," said Edward, the master-mind, rising—as he always did—to the situation: "We'll christen the piebald pig after him—the one that hasn't got a name yet. And that'll show we're sorry for our mistake!"

"I—I christened that pig this morning," Harold guiltily confessed: "I christened it after the curate. I'm very sorry—but he came and bowled to me last night, after you others had all been sent to bed early—and somehow I felt I *had* to do it!"

"Oh, but that doesn't count," said Edward hastily; "because we weren't all there. We'll take that christening off, and call it Uncle William. And you can save up the curate for the next litter!"

And the motion being agreed to without a division, the House went into Committee of Supply.

## ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

“**L**ET’S pretend,” suggested Harold, “that we’re Cavaliers and Roundheads ; and *you* be a Round-head !”

“O bother,” I replied drowsily, “we pretended that yesterday ; and it’s not my turn to be a Roundhead, anyhow.” The fact is, I was lazy, and the call to arms fell on indifferent ears. We three younger ones were stretched at length in the orchard. The sun was hot, the season merry June, and never (I thought) had there been such wealth and riot of buttercups throughout the lush grass. Green-and-gold was the dominant key that day. Instead of active “pretence” with its shouts and its perspiration, how much better—I held—to lie at ease and pretend to one’s self, in green and golden fancies, slipping the husk and passing, a careless loungee, through a sleepy imaginary world all gold and green ! But the persistent Harold was not to be fobbed off.

“Well then,” he began afresh, “let’s pretend we’re Knights of the Round Table ; and (with a rush) *I’ll* be Lancelot !”

“I won’t play unless I’m Lancelot,” I said. I didn’t mean it really, but the game of Knights always began with this particular contest.

“O *please*,” implored Harold. “You know when Edward’s here I never get a chance of being Lancelot. I haven’t been Lancelot for weeks !”

Then I yielded gracefully. “All right,” I said. “I’ll be Tristram”

“O, but you can’t,” cried Harold again. “Charlotte has always been Tristram. She won’t play unless she’s allowed to be Tristram ! Be somebody else this time.”



Charlotte said nothing, but breathed hard, looking straight before her. The peerless hunter and harper was her special hero of romance, and rather than see the part in less appreciative hands, she would have gone back in tears to the stuffy schoolroom.

"I don't care," I said : "I'll be anything. I'll be Sir Kay. Come on !"

Then once more in this country's story the mail-clad knights paced through the greenwood shaw, questing adventure, redressing wrong ; and bandits, five to one, broke and fled discomfited to their caves. Once more were damsels rescued, dragons disembowelled, and giants, in every corner of the orchard, deprived of their already superfluous number of heads ; while Palomides the Saracen waited for us by the well, and Sir Breuse Saunce Pit  vanished in craven flight before the skilled spear that was his terror and his bane. Once more the lists were dight in Camelot, and all was gay with shimmer of silk and gold ; the earth shook with thunder of hooves, ash-staves flew in splinters, and the firmament rang to the clash of sword on helm. The varying fortune of the day swung doubtful—now on this side, now on that ; till at last Lancelot, grim and great, thrusting through the press, unhorsed Sir Tristram (an easy task), and bestrode her, threatening doom ; while the Cornish knight, forgetting hard-won fame of old, cried piteously, "You're hurting me, I tell you ! and you're tearing my frock !" Then it happened that Sir Kay, hurtling to the rescue, stopped short in his stride, catching sight suddenly, through apple-boughs, of a gleam of scarlet afar off ; while the confused tramp of many horses, mingled with talk and laughter, was borne to the ears of his fellow-champions and himself.

"What is it ?" inquired Tristram, sitting up and shaking out her curls ; while Lancelot forsook the clanging lists and trotted nimbly to the boundary-hedge.

I stood spell-bound for a moment longer, and then, with a cry of "Soldiers !" I was off to the hedge, Sir Tristram picking herself up and scurrying after us.

• Down the road they came, two and two, at an easy walk; scarlet flamed in the eye, bits jingled and saddles squeaked delightfully; while the men, in a halo of dust, smoked their short clays like the heroes they were. In a swirl of intoxicating glory the troop clinked and clattered by, while we shouted and waved jumping up and down, and the big jolly horsemen acknowledged the salute with easy condescension. The moment they were past we were through the hedge and after them. Soldiers were not the common stuff of everyday life. There had been nothing like this since the winter before last, when on a certain afternoon—bare of leaf and monochromatic in its hue of sodden fallow and frost-nipt copse—suddenly the hounds had burst through the fence with their mellow cry, and all the paddock was for the minute reverberant of thudding hoof and dotted with glancing red. But this was better, since it could only mean that blows and bloodshed were in the air.

“Is there going to be a battle?” panted Harold, hardly able to keep up for excitement.

“Of course there is,” I replied. “We’re just in time. Come on!”

Perhaps I ought to have known better; and yet—? The pigs and poultry, with whom we chiefly consorted, could instruct us little concerning the peace that lapped in these latter days our seagirt realm. In the schoolroom we were just now dallying with the Wars of the Roses; and did not legends of the country-side inform us how cavaliers had once galloped up and down these very lanes from their quarters in the village? Here, now, were soldiers unmistakable; and if their business was not fighting, what was it? Sniffing the joy of battle, we followed hard in their tracks.

“Won’t Edward be sorry,” puffed Harold, “that he’s begun that beastly Latin?”

It did, indeed, seem hard. Edward, the most martial spirit of us all, was drearily conjugating *amo* (of all verbs!) between four walls; while Selina, who ever thrilled

ecstatic to a red coat, was struggling with the uncouth German tongue. "Age," I reflected, "carries its penalties."

It was a grievous disappointment to us that the troop passed through the village unmolested. Every cottage, I pointed out to my companions, ought to have been loop-holed, and strongly held. But no opposition was offered to the soldiers : who, indeed, conducted themselves with a recklessness and a want of precaution that seemed simply criminal.

At the last cottage a transitory gleam of common sense flickered across me, and, turning on Charlotte, I sternly ordered her back. The small maiden, docile but exceedingly dolorous, dragged reluctant feet homewards, heavy at heart that she was to behold no stout fellows slain that day ; but Harold and I held steadily on, expecting every instant to see the environing hedges crackle and spit forth the leaden death.

"Will they be Indians?" asked my brother (meaning the enemy), "or Roundheads, or what?"

I reflected. Harold always required direct straightforward answers—not faltering suppositions.

"They won't be Indians," I replied at last ; "nor yet Roundheads. There haven't been any Roundheads seen about here for a long time. They'll be Frenchmen."

Harold's face fell. "All right," he said : "Frenchmen'll do ; but I did hope they'd be Indians."

"If they were going to be Indians," I explained, "I—I don't think I'd go on. Because when Indians take you prisoner they scalp you first, and then burn you at the stake. But Frenchmen don't do that sort of thing."

"Are you quite sure?" asked Harold doubtfully.

"Quite," I replied. "Frenchmen only shut you up in a thing called the Bastille ; and then you get a file sent in to you in a loaf of bread, and saw the bars through, and slide down a rope, and they all fire at you—but they don't hit you—and you run down to the seashore as hard as you can, and swim off to a British frigate, and there you are !"

Harold brightened up again. The programme was rather attractive. "If they try to take us prisoner," he said, "we—we won't run, will we?"

Meanwhile, the craven foe was a long time showing himself; and we were reaching strange outland country, uncivilized, wherein lions might be expected to prowl at nightfall. I had a stitch in my side, and both Harold's stockings had come down. Just as I was beginning to have gloomy doubts of the proverbial courage of Frenchmen, the officer called out something, the men closed up, and, breaking into a trot, the troops—already far ahead—vanished out of our sight. With a sinking at the heart, I began to suspect we had been fooled.

"Are they charging?" cried Harold, very weary, but rallying gamely.

"I think not," I replied doubtfully. "When there's going to be a charge, the officer always makes a speech, and then they draw their swords and the trumpets blow, and—but let's try a short cut. We may catch them up yet."

So we struck across the fields and into another road, and pounded down that, and then over more fields, panting, down-hearted, yet hoping for the best. The sun went in, and a thin drizzle began to fall; we were muddy, breathless, almost dead-beat; but we blundered on, till at last we struck a road more brutally, more callously unfamiliar than any road I ever looked upon. Not a hint nor a sign of friendly direction or assistance on the dogged white face of it! There was no longer any disguising it: we were hopelessly lost. The small rain continued steadily, the evening began to come on. Really there are moments when a fellow is justified in crying; and I would have cried too, if Harold had not been there. That right-minded child regarded an elder brother as a veritable god; and I could see that he felt himself as secure as if a whole Brigade of Guards had hedged him round with protecting bayonets. But I dreaded sore lest he should begin again with his questions.

As I gazed in dumb appeal on the face of unresponsive nature, the sound of nearing wheels sent a pulse of hope through my being ; increasing to rapture as I recognized in the approaching vehicle the familiar carriage of the old doctor. If ever a god emerged from a machine, it was when this heaven-sent friend, recognizing us, stopped and jumped out with a cheery hail. Harold rushed up to him at once. " Have you been there ? " he cried. " Was it a jolly fight ? who beat ? were there many people killed ? "

The doctor appeared puzzled. I briefly explained the situation.

" I see," said the doctor, looking grave and twisting his face this way and that. " Well, the fact is, there isn't going to be any battle to-day. It's been put off on account of the change in the weather. You will have due notice of the renewal of hostilities. And now you'd better jump in and I'll drive you home. You've been running a fine rig ! Why, you might have both been taken and shot as spies ! "

This special danger had never even occurred to us. The thrill of it accentuated the cosy homelike feeling of the cushions we nestled into as we rolled homewards. The doctor beguiled the journey with blood-curdling narratives of personal adventure in the tented field, he having followed the profession of arms (so it seemed) in every quarter of the globe. Time, the destroyer of all things beautiful, subsequently revealed the baselessness of these legends ; but what of that ? There are higher things than truth ; and we were almost reconciled, by the time we were put down at our gate, to the fact that the battle had been postponed.

## THE FINDING OF THE PRINCESS

**I**T was the day I was promoted to a toothbrush. The girls, irrespective of age, had been thus distinguished some time before ; why, we boys could never rightly understand, except that it was part and parcel of a system of studied favouritism on behalf of creatures both physically inferior and (as was shown by a fondness for tale-bearing) of weaker mental fibre to us boys. It was not that we yearned after these strange instruments in themselves. Edward, indeed, applied his to the scrubbing-out of his squirrel's cage, and for personal use, when a superior eye was grim on him, borrowed Harold's or mine, indifferently. But the nimbus of distinction that clung to them—that we coveted exceedingly. What more, indeed, was there to ascend to, before the remote, but still possible, razor and strop ?

Perhaps the exaltation had mounted to my head ; or nature and the perfect morning joined to hunt at disaffection. Anyhow, having breakfasted, and triumphantly repeated the collect I had broken down in the last Sunday —'twas one without rhythm or alliteration : a most objectionable collect—having achieved thus much, the small natural man in me rebelled, and I vowed, as I straddled and spat about the stable-yard in feeble imitation of the coachman, that lessons might go to the Inventor of them. It was only geography that morning, any way : and the practical thing was worth any quantity of bookish theoric. As for me, I was going on my travels, and imports and exports, population and capitals, might very well wait while I explored the breathing coloured world outside.

True, a fellow-rebel was wanted ; and Harold might, as a rule, have been counted on with certainty. But just then Harold was very proud. The week before he had

"gone into tables," and had been endowed with a new slate, having a miniature sponge attached wherewith we washed the faces of Charlotte's dolls, thereby producing an unhealthy pallor which struck terror into the child's heart, always timorous regarding epidemic visitations. As to "tables," nobody knew exactly what they were, least of all Harold ; but it was a step over the heads of the rest, and therefore a subject of self-adulation and—generally speaking—airs ; so that Harold, hugging his slate and his chains, was out of the question now. In such a matter, girls were worse than useless, as wanting the necessary tenacity of will and contempt for self-constituted authority. So eventually I slipped through the hedge a solitary protestant, and issued forth on the lane what time the rest of the civilized world was sitting down to lessons.

The scene was familiar enough ; and yet, this morning, how different it all seemed ! The act, with its daring, tinted everything with new strange hues ; affecting the individual with a sort of bruised feeling just below the pit of the stomach, that was intensified whenever his thoughts flew back to the ink-stained smelly schoolroom. And could this be really me ? or was I only contemplating, from the schoolroom aforesaid, some other jolly young mutineer, faring forth under the genial sun ? Anyhow, here was the friendly well, in its old place, halfway up the lane. Hither the yoke-shouldering village-folk were wont to come to fill their clinking buckets ; when the drippings made worms of wet in the thick dust of the road. They had flat wooden crosses inside each pail, which floated on the top and (we were instructed) served to prevent the water from slopping over. We used to wonder by what magic this strange principle worked, and who first invented the crosses, and whether he got a peerage for it. But indeed the well was a centre of mystery, for a hornet's nest was somewhere hard by, and the very thought was fearsome. Wasps we knew well and disdained, storming them in their fastnesses. But these great Beasts, vested in angry orange, three stings from which—so 'twas averred

—would kill a horse, these were of a different kidney, and their dreadful drone suggested prudence and retreat. At this time neither villagers nor hornets encroached on the stillness : lessons, apparently, pervaded all Nature. So, after dabbling awhile in the well—what boy has ever passed a bit of water without messing in it ?—I scrambled through the hedge, shunning the hornet-haunted side, and struck into the silence of the copse.

If the lane had been deserted, this was loneliness become personal. Here mystery lurked and peeped ; here brambles caught and held you with a purpose of their own ; here saplings whipped your face with human spite. The copse, too, proved vaster in extent, more direfully drawn out, than one would ever have guessed from its frontage on the lane : and I was really glad when at last the wood opened and sloped down to a streamlet brawling forth into the sunlight. By this cheery companion I wandered along, conscious of little but that Nature, in providing store of water-rats, had thoughtfully furnished provender of right-sized stones. Rapids, also, there were, telling of canoes and portages—crinkling bays and inlets—caves for pirates and hidden treasures—the wise Dame had forgotten nothing—till at last, after what lapse of time I know not, my further course, though not the stream's, was barred by some six feet of stout wire netting, stretched from side to side just where a thick hedge, arching till it touched, forbade all further view.

The excitement of the thing was becoming thrilling. A Black Flag must surely be fluttering close by ? Here was most plainly a malignant contrivance of the Pirates, designed to baffle our gun-boats when we dashed upstream to shell them from their lair ! A gun-boat, indeed, might well have hesitated, so stout was the netting, so close the hedge. But I spied where a rabbit was wont to pass, close down by the water's edge ; where a rabbit could go a boy could follow, howbeit stomach-wise and with one leg in the stream ; so the passage was achieved, and I stood inside, safe but breathless at the sight.



Gone was the brambled waste, gone the flickering tangle of woodland. Instead, terrace after terrace of shaven sward, stone-edged, urn-cornered, stepped delicately down to where the stream, now tamed and educated, passed from one to another marble basin, in which on occasion gleams of red hinted at gold-fish poised among the spreading water-lilies. The scene lay silent and slumbrous in the brooding noonday sun : the drowsing peacock squatted humped on the lawn, no fish leaped in the pools, no bird declared himself from the trim secluding hedges. Self-confessed it was here, then, at last, the Garden of Sleep !

Two things, in those old days, I held in especial distrust : gamekeepers and gardeners. Seeing, however, no baleful apparitions of either quality, I pursued my way between rich flower-beds, in search of the necessary Princess. Conditions declared her presence patently as trumpets ; without this centre such surroundings could not exist. A pavilion, gold-topped, wreathed with lush jessamine, beckoned with a special significance over close-set shrubs. There, if anywhere, She should be enshrined. Instinct, and some knowledge of the habits of princesses, triumphed ; for (indeed) there She was ! In no tranced repose, however, but laughingly, struggling to disengage her hand from the grasp of a grown-up man who occupied the marble bench with her. (As to age, I suppose now that the two swung in respective scales that pivoted on twenty. But children heed no minor distinctions. To them, the inhabited world is composed of the two main divisions : children and up-grown people ; the latter in no way superior to the former—only hopelessly different. These two, then, belonged to the grown-up section.) I paused, thinking it strange they should prefer seclusion when there were fish to be caught, and butterflies to hunt in the sun outside ; and as I cogitated thus, the grown-up man caught sight of me.

"Hallo, sprat !" he said with some abruptness ; "where do you spring from ?"

"I came up the stream," I explained politely and

comprehensively, "and I was only looking for the Princess."

"Then you are a water-baby," he replied. "And what do you think of the Princess, now you've found her?"

"I think she is lovely," I said (and doubtless I was right, having never learned to flatter). "But she's wide-awake, so I suppose somebody has kissed her!"

This very natural deduction moved the grown-up man to laughter; but the Princess, turning red and jumping up, declared that it was time for lunch.

"Come along, then," said the grown-up man; "and you too, Water-baby. Come and have something solid. You must want it."

I accompanied them without any feeling of false delicacy. The world, as known to me, was spread with food each several mid-day, and the particular table one sat at seemed a matter of no importance. The palace was very sumptuous and beautiful, just what a palace ought to be; and we were met by a stately lady, rather more grown-up than the Princess—apparently her mother. My friend the Man was very kind, and introduced me as the Captain, saying I had just run down from Aldershot. I didn't know where Aldershot was, but I had no manner of doubt that he was perfectly right. As a rule, indeed, grown-up people are fairly correct on matters of fact; it is in the higher gift of imagination that they are so sadly to seek.

The lunch was excellent and varied. Another gentleman in beautiful clothes—a lord presumably—lifted me into a high carved chair, and stood behind it, brooding over me like a Providence. I endeavoured to explain who I was and where I had come from, and to impress the company with my own toothbrush and Harold's tables; but either they were stupid—or is it a characteristic of Fairyland that every one laughs at the most ordinary remarks? My friend the Man said good-naturedly, "All right, Water-baby; you came up the stream, and that's good enough for us." The lord—a reserved sort of man, I thought—took no share in the conversation.

After lunch I walked on the terrace with the Princess and my friend the Man, and was very proud. And I told him what I was going to be, and he told me what he was going to be ; and then I remarked, " I suppose you two are going to get married ? " He only laughed, after the Fairy fashion. " Because if you aren't," I added, " you really ought to " : meaning only that a man who discovered a Princess, living in the right sort of Palace like this, and didn't marry her there and then, was false to all recognized tradition.

They laughed again, and my friend suggested I should go down to the pond and look at the gold-fish, while they went for a stroll. I was sleepy, and assented ; but before they left me, the grown-up man put two half-crowns in my hand, for the purpose, he explained, of treating the other water-babies. I was so touched by this crowning mark of friendship that I nearly cried ; and I thought much more of his generosity than of the fact that the Princess, ere she moved away, stooped down and kissed me.

I watched them disappear down the path—how naturally arms seem to go round waists in Fairyland !—and then, my cheek on the cool marble, lulled by the trickle of water, I slipped into dreamland out of real and magic world alike. When I woke, the sun had gone in, a chill wind set all the leaves a-whispering, and the peacock on the lawn was harshly calling up the rain. A wild unreasoning panic possessed me, and I sped out of the garden like a guilty thing, wriggled through the rabbit-run, and threaded my doubtful way homewards, hounded by nameless terrors. The half-crowns happily remained solid and real to the touch ; but could I hope to bear such treasure safely through the brigand-haunted wood ? It was a dirty, weary little object that entered its home, at nightfall, by the unassuming aid of the scullery-window : and only to be sent tealess to bed seemed infinite mercy to him. Officially tealess, that is ; for, as was usual after such escapades, a sympathetic housemaid, coming delicately by backstairs, stayed him with chunks of cold pudding and

condolence, till his small skin was tight as any drum. Then, nature asserting herself, I passed into the comforting kingdom of sleep, where, a golden carp of fattest build, I oared it in translucent waters with a new half-crown snug under right fin and left ; and thrust up a nose through water-lily leaves to be kissed by a rose-flushed Princess.

## SAWDUST AND SIN

A BELT of rhododendrons grew close down to one side of our pond ; and along the edge of it many things flourished rankly. If you crept through the undergrowth and crouched by the water's rim, it was easy—if your imagination were in healthy working order—to transport yourself in a trice to the heart of a tropical forest. Overhead the monkeys chattered, parrots flashed from bough to bough, strange large blossoms shone all round you, and the push and rustle of great beasts moving unseen thrilled you deliciously. And if you lay down with your nose an inch or two from the water, it was not long ere the old sense of proportion vanished clean away. The glittering insects that darted to and fro on its surface became sea-monsters dire, the gnats that hung above them swelled to albatrosses, and the pond itself stretched out into a vast inland sea, whereon a navy might ride secure, and whence at any moment the hairy scalp of a sea-serpent might be seen to emerge.

It is impossible, however, to play at tropical forests properly, when homely accents of the human voice intrude ; and all my hopes of seeing a tiger seized by a crocodile while drinking (*vide* picture-books, *passim*) vanished abruptly, and earth resumed her old dimensions, when the sound of Charlotte's prattle somewhere hard by broke in on my primæval seclusion. Looking out from the bushes, I saw her trotting towards an open space of lawn the other side the pond, chattering to herself in her accustomed fashion, a doll tucked under either arm, and her brow knit with care. Propping up her double burthen against a friendly stump, she sat down in front of them, as full of worry and anxiety as a Chancellor on a Budget night.

•Her victims, who stared resignedly in front of them, were recognizable as Jerry and Rosa. Jerry hailed from far Japan : his hair was straight and black, his one garment cotton of a simple blue ; and his reputation was distinctly bad. Jerome was his proper name, from his supposed likeness to the holy man who hung in a print on the staircase ; though a shaven crown was the only thing in common 'twixt Western saint and Eastern sinner. Rosa was typical British, from her flaxen poll to the stout calves she displayed so liberally ; and in character she was of the blameless order of those who have not yet been found out.

I suspected Jerry from the first. There was a latent devilry in his slant eyes as he sat there moodily ; and knowing what he was capable of, I scented trouble in store for Charlotte. Rosa I was not so sure about ; she sat demurely and upright, and looked far away into the tree-tops in a visionary, world-forgetting sort of way ; yet the prim purse of her mouth was somewhat overdone, and her eyes glittered unnaturally.

"Now, I'm going to begin where I left off," said Charlotte, regardless of stops, and thumping the turf with her fist excitedly. "and you must pay attention, 'cos this is a treat, to have a story told you before you're put to bed. Well, so the White Rabbit scuttled off down the passage and Alice hoped he'd come back 'cos he had a waistcoat on and her flamingo flew up a tree—but we haven't got to that part yet, you must wait a minute, and—where had I got to ?"

Jerry only remained passive until Charlotte had got well under way, and then began to heel over quietly in Rosa's direction. His head fell on her plump shoulder, causing her to start nervously.

Charlotte seized and shook him with vigour. "O Jerry," she cried piteously, "if you're not going to be good, how ever shall I tell you my story ?"

Jerry's face was injured innocence itself. "Blame if you like, Madam," he seemed to say, "the eternal laws of

gravitation, but not a helpless puppet, who is also an orphan and a stranger in the land."

"Now we'll go on," began Charlotte once more. "So she got into the garden at last—I've left out a lot but you won't care, I'll tell you some other time—and they were all playing croquet, and that's where the flamingo comes in, and the Queen shouted out, 'Off with her head!'"

At this point Jerry collapsed forward, suddenly and completely, his bald pate between his knees. Charlotte was not very angry this time. The sudden development of tragedy in the story had evidently been too much for the poor fellow. She straightened him out, wiped his nose, and, after trying him in various positions, to which he refused to adapt himself, she propped him against the shoulder of the (apparently) unconscious Rosa. Then my eyes were opened, and the full measure of Jerry's infamy became apparent. This, then, was what he had been playing up for! The rascal had designs, had he? I resolved to keep him under close observation.

"If you'd been in the garden," went on Charlotte reproachfully, "and flopped down like that when the Queen said 'Off with his head!' she'd have offed with your head; but Alice wasn't that sort of girl at all. She just said, 'I'm not afraid of you, you're nothing but a pack of cards'—O dear! I've got to the end already, and I hadn't begun hardly! I never can make my stories last out! Never mind, I'll tell you another one."

Jerry didn't seem to care, now he had gained his end, whether the stories lasted out or not. He was nestling against Rosa's plump form with a look of satisfaction that was simply idiotic; and one arm had disappeared from view—was it round her waist? Rosa's natural blush seemed deeper than usual, her head inclined shyly—it must have been round her waist.

"If it wasn't so near your bedtime," continued Charlotte reflectively, "I'd tell you a nice story with a bogey in it. But you'd be frightened, and you'd dream of bogies all night. So I'll tell you one about a White Bear, only you

mustn't scream when the bear says 'Wow,' like I used to, 'cos he's a good bear really——"

Here Rosa fell flat on her back in the dearest of faints. Her limbs were rigid, her eyes glassy. What had Jerry been doing? It must have been something very bad, for her to take on like that. I scrutinized him carefully, while Charlotte ran to comfort the damsel. He appeared to be whistling a tune and regarding the scenery. If I only possessed Jerry's command of feature, I thought to myself, half regretfully, I would never be found out in anything.

"It's all your fault, Jerry," said Charlotte reproachfully, when the lady had been restored to consciousness: "Rosa's as good as gold except when you make her wicked. I'd put you in the corner, only a stump hasn't got a corner—wonder why that is? Thought everything had corners. Never mind, you'll have to sit with your face to the wall—so. Now you can sulk if you like!"

Jerry seemed to hesitate a moment between the bliss of indulgence in sulks with a sense of injury, and the imperious summons of beauty waiting to be wooed at his elbow; then, overmastered by his passion, he fell sideways across Rosa's lap. One arm stuck stiffly upwards, as in passionate protestation; his amorous countenance was full of entreaty. Rosa hesitated—wavered—yielded, crushing his slight frame under the weight of her full-bodied surrender.

Charlotte had stood a good deal, but it was possible to abuse even her patience. Snatching Jerry from his lawless embraces, she reversed him across her knee, and then—the outrage offered to the whole superior sex in Jerry's hapless person was too painful to witness; but though I turned my head away the sound of brisk slaps continued to reach my tingling ears. When I dared to look again, Jerry was sitting up as before; his garment, somewhat crumpled, was restored to its original position; but his pallid countenance was set hard. Knowing as I did, only too well, what a volcano of passion and shame must be seething under that impassive exterior, for the moment I felt sorry for him.



Rosa's face was still buried in her frock ; it might have been shame, it might have been grief for Jerry's sufferings. But the callous Japanese never even looked her way. His heart was exceeding bitter within him. In merely following up his natural impulses he had run his head against convention, and learned how hard a thing it was ; and the sunshiny world was all black to him. Even Charlotte softened somewhat at the sight of his rigid misery. " If you'll say you're sorry, Jerome," she said, " I'll say I'm sorry too."

Jerry only dropped his shoulders against the stump and stared out in the direction of his dear native Japan, where love was no sin, and smacking had not been introduced. Why had he ever left it ? He would go back to-morrow ! And yet there were obstacles : another grievance. Nature, in endowing Jerry with every grace of form and feature, along with a sensitive soul, had somehow forgotten the gift of locomotion.

There was a crackling in the bushes behind me, with sharp short pants as of a small steam-engine, and Rollo, the black retriever, just released from his chain by some friendly hand, burst through the underwood, seeking congenial company. I joyfully hailed him to stop and be a panther, but he sped away round the pond, upset Charlotte with a boisterous caress, and seizing Jerry by the middle, disappeared with him down the drive. Charlotte panting, raved behind the swift-footed avenger of crime, Rosa lay dishevelled, bereft of consciousness ; Jerry himself spread helpless arms to heaven, and I almost thought I heard a cry for mercy, a tardy promise of amendment. But it was too late. The Black Man had got Jerry at last ; and though the tear of sensibility might bedew an eye or two for his lost sake, no one who really knew him could deny the justice of his fate.

## THE BURGLARS

IT was much too fine a night to think of going to bed at once, and so, although the witching hour of nine p.m. had struck, Edward and I were still leaning out of the open window in our nightshirts, watching the play of the cedar-branch shadows on the moonlit lawn, and planning schemes of fresh devilry for the sunshiny morrow. From below, strains of the jocund piano declared that the Olympians were enjoying themselves in their listless impotent way ; for the new curate had been bidden to dinner that night, and was at the moment unclerically proclaiming to all the world that he feared no foe. His discordant vociferations doubtless started a train of thought in Edward's mind, for he presently remarked, *à propos* of nothing whatever that had been said before, " I believe the new curate's rather gone on Aunt Maria."

I scouted the notion. " Why, she's quite old," I said. (She must have seen some five-and-twenty summers.)

" Of course she is," replied Edward scornfully. " It's not her, it's her money he's after, you bet ! "

" Didn't know she had any money," I observed timidly.

" Sure to have," said my brother with confidence. " Heaps and heaps."

Silence ensued, both our minds being busy with the new situation thus presented : mine, in wonderment at this flaw that so often declared itself in enviable natures of fullest endowment,—in a grown-up man and a good cricketer, for instance, even as this curate ; Edward's (apparently) in the consideration of how such a state of things, supposing it existed, could be best turned to his own advantage.

"Bobby Ferris told me," began Edward in due course, "that there was a fellow spooning his sister once——"

"What's spooning?" I asked meekly.

"O I dunno," said Edward indifferently. "It's—it's just a thing they do, you know. And he used to carry notes and messages and things between 'em, and he got a shilling almost every time."

"What, from each of 'em?" I innocently inquired.

Edward looked at me with scornful pity. "Girls never have any money," he briefly explained. "But she did his exercises, and got him out of rows, and told stories for him when he needed it—and much better ones than he could have made up for himself. Girls are useful in some ways. So he was living in clover, when unfortunately they went and quarrelled about something"

"Don't see what that's got to do with it," I said.

"Nor don't I," rejoined Edward. "But anyhow the notes and things stopped, and so did the shillings. Bobby was fairly cornered, for he had bought two ferrets on tick, and promised to pay a shilling a week, thinking the shillings were going on for ever, the silly young ass. So when the week was up, and he was being dunned for the shilling, he went off to the fellow and said: 'Your broken-hearted Bella implores you to meet her at sundown. By the hollow oak as of old, be it only for a moment. Do not fail!' He got all that out of some rotten book, of course. The fellow looked puzzled and said:

"'What hollow oak? I don't know any hollow oak.'

"'Perhaps it was the Royal Oak?' said Bobby promptly, 'cos he saw he had made a slip, through trusting too much to the rotten book; but this didn't seem to make the fellow any happier."

"Should think not," I said, "the Royal Oak's an awful low sort of pub."

"I know," said Edward. "Well, at last the fellow said, 'I think I know what she means: the hollow tree in your father's paddock. It happens to be an elm, but she wouldn't know the difference. All right: say I'll be

there.' Bobby hung about a bit, for he hadn't got his money. 'She was crying awfully,' he said. Then he got his shilling."

"And wasn't the fellow riled," I inquired, "when he got to the place and found nothing?"

"He found Bobby," said Edward indignantly. "Young Ferris was a gentleman, every inch of him. He brought the fellow another message from Bella: 'I dare not leave the house. My cruel parents immure me closely. If you only knew what I suffer. Your broken-hearted Bella.' Out of the same rotten book. This made the fellow a little suspicious, 'cos it was the old Ferrises who had been keen about the thing all through. The fellow, you see, had tin"

"But what's that got to——" I began again.

"O I dunno," said Edward impatiently. "I'm telling you just what Bobby told me. He got suspicious, anyhow, but he couldn't exactly call Bella's brother a liar, so Bobby escaped for the time. But when he was in a hole next week, over a stiff French exercise, and tried the same sort of game on his sister, she was too sharp for him, and he got caught out. Somehow women seem more mistrustful than men. They're so beastly suspicious by nature, you know"

"I know," said I. "But did the two—the fellow and the sister—make it up afterwards?"

"I don't remember about that," replied Edward indifferently; "but Bobby got packed off to school a whole year earlier than his people meant to send him. Which was just what he wanted. So you see it all came right in the end!"

I was trying to puzzle out the moral of this story—it was evidently meant to contain one somewhere—when a flood of golden lamplight mingled with the moon-rays on the lawn, and Aunt Maria and the new curate strolled out on the grass below us, and took the direction of a garden-seat which was backed by a dense laurel shrubbery reaching round in a half-circle to the house. Edward meditated moodily. "If we only knew what they were talking about," said he, "you'd soon see whether I was right or not. Look

here ! "Let's send the kid down by the porch to reconnoitre !"

"Harold's asleep," I said ; "it seems rather a shame——"

"O rot !" said my brother ; "he's the youngest, and he's got to do as he's told !"

So the luckless Harold was hauled out of bed and given his sailing-orders. He was naturally rather vexed at being stood up suddenly on the cold floor, and the job had no particular interest for him ; but he was both staunch and well disciplined. The means of exit were simple enough. A porch of iron trellis came up to within easy reach of the window, and was habitually used by all three of us, when modestly anxious to avoid public notice. Harold climbed deftly down the porch like a white rat, and his night-gown glimmered a moment on the gravel walk ere he was lost to sight in the darkness of the shrubbery. A brief interval of silence ensued ; broken suddenly by a sound of scuffle, and then a shrill long-drawn squeal, as of metallic surfaces in friction. Our scout had fallen into the hands of the enemy !

Indolence alone had made us devolve the task of investigation on our younger brother. Now that danger had declared itself, there was no hesitation. In a second we were down the side of the porch, and crawling Cherokee-wise through the laurels to the back of the garden-seat. Piteous was the sight that greeted us. Aunt Maria was on the seat, in a white evening frock, looking—for an aunt—really quite nice. On the lawn stood an incensed curate, grasping our small brother by a large ear, which—judging from the row he was making—seemed on the point of parting company with the head it completed and adorned. The gruesome noise he was emitting did not really affect us otherwise than æsthetically. To one who has tried both, the wail of genuine physical anguish is easily distinguishable from the pumped-up *ad misericordiam* blubber. Harold's could clearly be recognized as belonging to the latter class. "Now you young—" (whelp, I think it was, but Edward stoutly

maintains it was devil), said the curate sternly ; " tell us what you mean by it ! "

" Well, leggo of my ear then ! " shrilled Harold, " and I'll tell you the solemn truth ! "

" Very well," agreed the curate, releasing him, " now go ahead, and don't lie more than you can help."

We abode the promised disclosure without the least misgiving ; but even we had hardly given Harold due credit for his fertility of resource and powers of imagination.

" I had just finished saying my prayers," began that young gentleman slowly, " when I happened to look out of the window, and on the lawn I saw a sight which froze the marrow in my veins ! A burglar was approaching the house with snake-like tread ! He had a scowl and a dark lantern, and he was armed to the teeth ! "

We listened with interest. The style, though unlike Harold's native notes, seemed strangely familiar.

" Go on," said the curate grimly.

" Pausing in his stealthy career," continued Harold, " he gave a low whistle. Instantly the signal was responded to, and from the adjacent shadows two more figures glided forth. The miscreants were both armed to the teeth."

" Excellent," said the curate ; " proceed."

" The robber chief," pursued Harold, warming to his work, " joined his nefarious comrades, and conversed with them in silent tones. His expression was truly ferocious, and I ought to have said that he was armed to the t——"

" There, never mind his teeth," interrupted the curate rudely ; " there's too much jaw about you altogether. Hurry up and have done."

" I was in a frightful funk," continued the narrator, warily guarding his ear with his hand, " but just then the drawing-room window opened, and you and Aunt Maria came out—I mean emerged. The burglars vanished silently into the laurels, with horrid implications ! "

The curate looked slightly puzzled. The tale was well sustained, and certainly circumstantial. After all, the boy might really have seen something. How was the poor man

to know—though the chaste and lofty diction might have supplied a hint—that the whole yarn was a free adaptation from the last Penny Dreadful lent us by the knife-and-boot boy ?

“ Why did you not alarm the house ? ” he asked.

“ ‘Cos I was afraid,” said Harold sweetly, “ that p’raps they mightn’t believe me ! ”

“ But how did you get down here, you naughty little boy ? ” put in Aunt Maria.

Harold was hard pressed—by his own flesh and blood, too !

At that moment Edward touched me on the shoulder and glided off through the laurels. When some ten yards away he gave a low whistle. I replied with another. The effect was magical. Aunt Maria started up with a shriek. Harold gave one startled glance around, and then fled like a hare, made straight for the back-door, burst in upon the servants at supper, and buried himself in the broad bosom of the cook, his special ally. The curate faced the laurels—hesitatingly. But Aunt Maria flung herself on him. “ O Mr. Hodgitts ! ” I heard her cry, “ you are brave ! for my sake do not be rash ! ” He was not rash. When I peeped out a second later the coast was entirely clear.

By this time there were sounds of a household timidly emerging ; and Edward remarked to me that perhaps we had better be off. Retreat was an easy matter. A stunted laurel gave a leg-up on to the garden wall, which led in its turn to the roof of an out-house, up which, at a dubious angle, we could crawl to the window of the box-room. This overland route had been revealed to us one day by the domestic cat, when hard pressed in the course of an otter-hunt, in which the cat—somewhat unwillingly—was filling the title-rôle ; and it had proved distinctly useful on occasions like the present. We were snug in bed—minus some cuticle from knees and elbows—and Harold, sleepily chewing something sticky, had been carried up in the arms of the friendly cook, ere the clamour of the burglar-hunters had died away.

The curate's undaunted demeanour, as reported by Aunt Maria, was generally supposed to have terrified the burglars into flight, and much kudos accrued to him thereby. Some days later, however, when he had dropped in to afternoon tea, and was making a mild curatorial joke about the moral courage required for taking the last piece of bread-and-butter, I felt constrained to remark dreamily, and as it were to the universe at large : " Mr. Hodgitts ! you are brave ! for my sake do not be rash ! "

Fortunately for me, the vicar also was a caller on that day ; and it was always a comparatively easy matter to dodge my long-coated friend in the open.



## SNOWBOUND

**T**WELFTH-NIGHT had come and gone, and life next morning seemed a trifle flat and purposeless. But yester-eve, and the mummers were here ! They had come striding into the old kitchen, powdering the red brick floor with snow from their barbaric bedizenments ; and stamping, and crossing, and declaiming, till all was whirl and riot and shout. Harold was frankly afraid : unabashed, he buried himself in the cook's ample bosom. Edward feigned a manly superiority to illusion, and greeted these awful apparitions familiarly, as Dick and Harry and Joe. As for me, I was too big to run, too rapt to resist the magic and surprise. Whence came these outlanders, breaking in on us with song and ordered masque and a terrible clashing of wooden swords ? And after these, what strange visitants might we not look for any quiet night, when the chestnuts popped in the ashes, and the old ghost stories drew the awestricken circle close ? Old Merlin, perhaps, " all furred in black sheep-skins, and a russet gown, with a bow and arrows, and bearing wild geese in his hand ! " Or stately Ogier the Dane, recalled from Faery, asking his way to the land that once had need of him ! Or even, on some white night, the Snow-Queen herself, with a chime of sleigh-bells and the patter of reindeer's feet, halting of a sudden at the door flung wide, while aloft the Northern Lights went shaking attendant spears among the quiet stars !

This morning, house-bound by the relentless indefatigable snow, I was feeling the reaction. Edward, on the contrary, being violently stage-struck on this his first introduction to the real Drama, was striding up and down the floor, proclaiming " Here be I, King George the Third," in a strong

Berkshire accent. Harold, accustomed, as the youngest, to lonely antics and to sports that asked no sympathy, was absorbed in "clubmen": a performance consisting in a measured progress round the room arm-in-arm with an imaginary companion of reverend years, with occasional halts at imaginary clubs, where—imaginary steps being leisurely ascended—imaginary papers were glanced at, imaginary scandal was discussed with elderly shakings of the head, and—regrettable to say—imaginary glasses were lifted lipwards. Heaven only knows how the germ of this dreary pastime first found way into his small-boyish being. It was his own invention, and he was proportionately proud of it. Meanwhile Charlotte and I, crouched in the window-seat, watched, spell-stricken, the whirl and eddy and drive of the innumerable snow-flakes, wrapping our cheery little world in an uncanny uniform, ghastly in line and hue.

Charlotte was sadly out of spirits. Having "countered" Miss Smedley at breakfast, during some argument or other, by an apt quotation from her favourite classic (the *Fairy Book*), she had been gently but firmly informed that no such things as fairies ever really existed. "Do you mean to say it's all lies?" asked Charlotte bluntly. Miss Smedley deprecated the use of any such unladylike words in any connexion at all. "These stories had their origin, my dear," she explained, "in a mistaken anthropomorphism in the interpretation of nature. But though we are now too well informed to fall into similar errors, there are still many beautiful lessons to be learned from these myths——"

"But how can you learn anything," persisted Charlotte, "from what doesn't exist?" And she left the table defiant, howbeit depressed.

"Don't you mind *her*," I said consolingly; "how can she know anything about it? Why, she can't even throw a stone properly!"

"Edward says they're all rot, too," replied Charlotte doubtfully.

"Edward says everything's rot," I explained, "now he

thinks he's going into the Army. If a thing's in a book it *must* be true, so that settles it ! ”

Charlotte looked almost reassured. The room was quieter now, for Edward had got the dragon down and was boring holes in him with a purring sound ; Harold was ascending the steps of the Athenæum with a jaunty air—suggestive rather of the Junior Carlton. Outside, the tall elm-tops were hardly to be seen through the feathery storm. “ The sky's a-falling,” quoted Charlotte softly ; “ I must go and tell the king.” The quotation suggested a fairy story, and I offered to read to her, reaching out for the book. But the Wee Folk were under a cloud ; sceptical hints had embittered the chalice. So I was fain to fetch *Arthur*—second favourite with Charlotte for his dames riding errant, and an easy first with us boys for his spear-splintering crash of tourney and hurtle against hopeless odds. Here again, however, I proved unfortunate , what ill-luck made the book open at the sorrowful history of Balin and Balan ? “ And he vanished anon,” I read : “ and so he heard an horne blow, as it had been the death of a beast ‘ That blast,’ said Balin, ‘ is blowen for me, for I am the prize, and yet am I not dead ’ ” Charlotte began to cry : she knew the rest too well. I shut the book in despair. Harold emerged from behind the arm-chair. He was sucking his thumb (a thing which members of the Reform are seldom seen to do), and he stared wide-eyed at his tear-stained sister. Edward put off his histrionics, and rushed up to her as the consoler—a new part for him. “

“ I know a jolly story,” he began. “ Aunt Eliza told it me. It was when she was somewhere over in that beastly abroad ”—(he had once spent a black month of misery at Dinan)—“ and there was a fellow there who had got two storks. And one stork died—it was the she-stork.”—(“ What did it die of ? ” put in Harold.)—“ And the other stork was quite sorry, and moped, and went on, and got very miserable. So they looked about and found a duck, and introduced it to the stork. The duck was a drake, but the stork didn't mind, and they loved each other and were as

jolly as could be. By and by another duck came along—a real she-duck this time—and when the drake saw her he fell in love, and left the stork, and went and proposed to the duck : for she was very beautiful. But the poor stork who was left, he said nothing at all to anybody, but just pined and pined and pined away, till one morning he was found quite dead : But the ducks lived happily ever afterwards ! ”

This was Edward's idea of a jolly story ! Down again went the corners of poor Charlotte's mouth. Really Edward's stupid inability to see the real point in anything was *too* annoying ! It was always so. Years before, it being necessary to prepare his youthful mind for a domestic event that might lead to awkward questionings at a time when there was little leisure to invent appropriate answers, it was delicately inquired of him whether he would like to have a little brother, or perhaps a little sister ? He considered the matter carefully in all its bearings, and finally declared for a Newfoundland pup. Any boy more “ gleg at the uptak ” would have met his parents half-way, and eased their burden. As it was, the matter had to be approached all over again from a fresh standpoint. And now, while Charlotte turned away sniffingly, with a hiccup that told of an overwrought soul, Edward, unconscious (like Sir Isaac's Diamond) of the mischief he had done, wheeled round on Harold with a shout.

“ I want a live dragon,” he announced. “ You've got to be my dragon ! ”

“ Leave me go, will you ? ” squealed Harold, struggling stoutly. “ I'm playin' at something else. How can I be a dragon and belong to all the clubs ? ”

“ But wouldn't you like to be a nice scaly dragon, all green,” said Edward, trying persuasion, “ with a curly tail and red eyes, and breathing real smoke and fire ? ”

Harold wavered an instant : Pall-Mall was still strong in him. The next he was grovelling on the floor. No saurian ever swung a tail so scaly and so curly as his. Club-

land was a thousand years away. With horrific pants he emitted smokiest smoke and fiercest fire.

"Now I want a Princess," cried Edward, clutching Charlotte ecstatically ; "and *you* can be the Doctor, and heal me from the dragon's deadly wound."

Of all professions I held the sacred art of healing in worst horror and contempt. Cataclysmal memories of purge and draught crowded thick on me, and with Charlotte—who courted no barren honours—I made a break for the door. Edward did likewise, and the hostile forces clashed together on the mat, and for a brief space things were mixed and chaotic and Arthurian. The silvery sound of the luncheon-bell restored an instant peace, even in the teeth of clenched antagonisms like ours. The Holy Grail itself, "sliding athwart a sunbeam," never so effectually stilled a riot of warring passions into sweet and quiet accord.

## WHAT THEY TALKED ABOUT

EDWARD was standing ginger-beer like a gentleman, happening, as the one that had last passed under the dentist's hands, to be the capitalist of the flying hour. As in all well-regulated families, the usual tariff obtained in ours : half a crown a tooth ; one shilling only if the molar were a loose one. This one, unfortunately—in spite of Edward's interested affectation of agony—had been shakiness undisguised ; but the event was good enough to run to ginger-beer. As financier, however, Edward had claimed exemption from any servile duties of procurement, and had swaggered about the garden while I fetched from the village post-office, and Harold stole a tumbler from the pantry. Our preparations complete, we were sprawling on the lawn ; the staidest and most self-respecting of the rabbits had been let loose to grace the feast, and was lopping demurely about the grass, selecting the juiciest plantains ; while Selina, as the eldest lady present, was toying, in her affected feminine way, with the first full tumbler, daintily fishing for bits of broken cork.

"Hurry up, can't you?" growled our host ; "what are you girls always so beastly particular for?"

"Martha says," explained Harold (thirsty too, but still just), "that if you swallow a bit of cork, it swells, and it swells, and it swells inside you, till you——"

"O bosh!" said Edward, draining the glass with a fine pretence of indifference to consequences, but all the same (as I noticed) dodging the floating cork-fragments with skill and judgment.

"O, it's all very well to say bosh," replied Harold nettled : "but every one knows it's true but you. Why, when Uncle Thomas was here last, and they got up a bottle

of wine for him, he took just one tiny sip out of his glass, and then he said, "Poo, my goodness, that's corked!" And he wouldn't touch it. And they had to get a fresh bottle up. The funny part was, though, I looked in his glass afterwards, when it was brought out into the passage, and there wasn't any cork in it at all! So I drank it all off, and it was very good!"

"You'd better be careful, young man!" said his elder brother, regarding him severely. "D'you remember that night when the Mummers were here, and they had mulled port, and you went round and emptied all the glasses after they had gone away?"

"Ow! I did feel funny that night," chuckled Harold. "Thought the house was comin' down, it jumped about so: and Martha had to carry me up to bed, 'cos the stairs was goin' all waggity!"

We gazed searchingly at our graceless junior; but it was clear that he viewed the matter in the light of a phenomenon rather than of a delinquency.

A third bottle was by this time circling; and Selina, who had evidently waited for it to reach her, took a most unfairly long pull, and then, jumping up and shaking out her frock, announced that she was going for a walk. Then she fled like a hare, for it was the custom of our Family to meet with physical coercion any independence of action in individuals.

"She's off with those Vicarage girls again," said Edward, regarding Selina's long black legs twinkling down the path. "She goes out with them every day now; and as soon as ever they start, all their heads go together and they chatter, chatter, chatter the whole blessed time! I can't make out what they find to talk about. They never stop; it's gabble, gabble, gabble right along, like a nest of young rooks!"

"P'raps they talk about birds'-eggs," I suggested sleepily (the sun was hot, the turf soft, the ginger-beer potent); "and about ships, and buffaloes, and desert islands; and why rabbits have white tails; and whether they'd sooner have a schooner or a cutter; and what they'll

be when they're men—at least, I mean there's lots of things to talk about, if you *want* to talk."

"Yes ; but they don't talk about those sort of things at all," persisted Edward. "How *can* they? They don't *know* anything ; they can't *do* anything—except play the piano, and nobody would want to talk about *that* ; and they don't care about anything—anything sensible, I mean. So what *do* they talk about?"

"I asked Martha once," put in Harold ; "and she said, 'Never *you* mind ; young ladies has lots of things to talk about that young gentlemen can't understand'."

"I don't believe it," Edward growled

"Well, that's what she *said*, anyway," rejoined Harold indifferently. The subject did not seem to him of first-class importance, and it was hindering the circulation of the ginger-beer.

We heard the click of the front-gate. Through a gap in the hedge we could see the party setting off down the road. Selina was in the middle ; a Vicarage girl had her by either arm ; their heads were together, as Edward had described ; and the clack of their tongues came down the breeze like the busy pipe of starlings on a bright March morning.

"What *do* they talk about, Charlotte?" I inquired, wishing to pacify Edward. "You go out with them sometimes."

"I don't know," said poor Charlotte dolefully. "They make me walk behind, 'cos they say I'm too little, and mustn't hear. And I *do* want to so," she added.

"When any lady comes to see Aunt Eliza," said Harold, "they both talk at once all the time. And yet each of 'em seems to hear what the other one's saying. I can't make out how they do it. Grown-up people are so clever!"

"The Curate's the funniest man," I remarked. "He's always saying things that have no sense in them at all, and then laughing at them as if they were jokes. Yesterday, when they asked him if he'd have some more tea, he said, 'Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,' and then sniggered all over. I didn't see anything funny



in that. And then somebody asked him about his button-hole, and he said, ' 'Tis but a little faded flower,' and exploded again. I thought it very stupid."

"O *hum*," said Edward contemptuously: "he can't help it, you know; it's a sort of way he's got. But it's these girls I can't make out. If they've anything really sensible to talk about, how is it nobody knows what it is? And if they haven't—and we know they *can't* have, naturally—why don't they shut up their jaw? This old rabbit here—he doesn't want to talk. He's got something better to do." And Edward aimed a ginger-beer cork at the unruffled beast, who never budged.

"O but rabbits *do* talk," interposed Harold. "I've watched them often in their hutch. They put their heads together and their noses go up and down, just like Selina's and the Vicarage girls'. Only of course I can't hear what they're saying."

"Well, if they do," said Edward unwillingly, "I'll bet they don't talk such rot as those girls do!" Which was ungenerous, as well as unfair; for it had not yet transpired—nor has it to this day—*what* Selina and her friends talked about.

## THE ARGONAUTS.

THE advent of strangers, of whatever sort, into our circle had always been a matter of grave dubiety and suspicion. Indeed, it was generally a signal for retreat into caves and fastnesses of the earth, into unthreaded copses or remote outlying cowsheds, whence we were only to be extricated by wily nursemaids, rendered familiar by experience with our secret runs and refuges. It was not surprising, therefore, that the heroes of classic legend, when first we made their acquaintance, failed to win our entire sympathy at once. "Confidence," says somebody, "is a plant of slow growth"; and these stately dark-haired demi-gods, with names hard to master and strange accoutrements, had to win a citadel already strongly garrisoned with a more familiar soldiery. Their chill foreign goddesses had no such direct appeal for us as the mocking malicious fairies and witches of the North. We missed the pleasant alliance of the animal—the fox who spread the bushiest of tails to convey us to the enchanted castle, the frog in the well, the raven who croaked advice from the tree; and—to Harold especially—it seemed entirely wrong that the hero should ever be other than the youngest brother of three. This belief, indeed, in the special fortune that ever awaited the youngest brother, as such,—the "Borough-English" of Faery,—had been of baleful effect on Harold, producing a certain self-conceit and perkiness that called for physical correction. But even in our admonishment we were on his side; and as we distrustfully eyed these new arrivals, old Saturn himself seemed something of a *parvenu*.

Even strangers, however, if they be good fellows at heart, may develop into sworn comrades; and these gay swordsmen, after all, were of the right stuff Perseus, with his

cap of darkness and his wonderful sandals, was not long in winging his way to our hearts. Apollo knocked at Admetus' gate in something of the right fairy fashion. Psyche brought with her an orthodox palace of magic, as well as helpful birds and friendly ants. Ulysses, with his captivating shifts and strategies, broke down the final barrier, and henceforth the band was adopted and admitted into our freemasonry.

I had been engaged in chasing Farmer Larkin's calves—his special pride—round the field, just to show the man we hadn't forgotten him, and was returning through the kitchen-garden with a conscience at peace with all men, when I happened upon Edward, grubbing for worms in the dung-heap. Edward put his worms into his hat and we strolled along together, discussing high matters of state. As we reached the tool-shed, strange noises arrested our steps; looking in, we perceived Harold, alone, rapt, absorbed, immersed in the special game of the moment. He was squatting in an old pig-trough that had been brought in to be tinkered; and as he rhapsodized, anon he waved a shovel over his head, anon dug it into the ground with the action of those who would urge Canadian canoes. Edward strode in upon him.

"What rot are you playing at now?" he demanded sternly.

Harold flushed up, but stuck to his pig-trough like a man. "I'm Jason," he replied defiantly; "and this is the Argo. The other fellows are here too, only you can't see them; and we're just going through the Hellespont, so don't you come bothering." And once more he plied the wine-dark sea.

Edward kicked the pig-trough contemptuously. "Pretty sort of Argo you've got!" said he.

Harold began to get annoyed. "I can't help it," he retorted. "It's the best sort of Argo I can manage, and it's all right if you only pretend enough. But *you* never could pretend one bit."

Edward reflected. "Look here," he said presently.

"Why shouldn't we get hold of Farmer Larkin's boat, and go right away up the river in a real Argo, and look for Medea, and the Golden Fleece, and everything? And I'll tell you what, I don't mind your being Jason, as you thought of it first."

Harold tumbled out of the trough in the excess of his emotion. "But we aren't allowed to go on the water by ourselves," he cried.

"No," said Edward, with fine scorn: "we aren't allowed; and Jason wasn't allowed either, I daresay. But he *went*!"

Harold's protest had been merely conventional: he only wanted to be convinced by sound argument. The next question was, How about the girls? Selina was distinctly handy in a boat · the difficulty about her was, that if she disapproved of the expedition—and, morally considered, it was not exactly a Pilgrim's Progress—she might go and tell; she having just reached that disagreeable age when one begins to develop a conscience. Charlotte, for her part, had a habit of day-dreams, and was as likely as not to fall overboard in one of her rapt musings. To be sure, she would dissolve in tears when she found herself left out; but even that was better than a watery tomb. In fine, the public voice—and rightly, perhaps—was against the admission of the skirted animal · despite the precedent of Atalanta, who was one of the original crew.

"And now," said Edward, "who's to ask Farmer Larkin? I can't; last time I saw him he said when he caught me again he'd smack my head *You'll* have to."

I hesitated, for good reasons. "You know those precious calves of his?" I began.

Edward understood at once. "All right," he said; "then we won't ask him at all. It doesn't much matter. He'd only be annoyed, and that would be a pity. Now let's set off!"

We made our way down to the stream, and captured the farmer's boat without let or hindrance, the enemy being engaged in the hayfields. This "river," so called, could

never be discovered by us in any atlas ; indeed, our Argo could hardly turn in it without risk of shipwreck. But to us 'twas Orinoco, and the cities of the world dotted its shores. We put the Argo's head upstream, since that led away from the Larkin province ; Harold was faithfully permitted to be Jason, and we shared the rest of the heroes among us. Then, quitting Thessaly, we threaded the Hellespont with shouts, breathlessly dodged the Clashing Rocks, and coasted under the lee of the Siren-haunted isles. Lemnos was fringed with meadow-sweet, dog-roses dotted the Mysian shore, and the cheery call of the haymaking folk sounded along the coast of Thrace

After some hour or two's seafaring, the prow of the Argo embedded itself in the mud of a landing-place, plashy with the tread of cows and giving on to a lane that led towards the smoke of human habitations. Edward jumped ashore, alert for exploration, and strode off without waiting to see if we followed ; but I lingered behind, having caught sight of a moss-grown water-gate hard by, leading into a garden that, from the brooding quiet lapping it round, appeared to portend magical possibilities

Indeed, the very air within seemed stiller, as we circumspectly passed through the gate, and Harold hung back shamefaced, as if we were crossing the threshold of some private chamber, and ghosts of old days were hustling past us. Flowers there were, everywhere ; but they drooped and sprawled in an overgrowth hinting at indifference ; the scent of heliotrope possessed the place as if actually hung in solid festoons from tall untrimmed hedge to hedge. No basket-chairs, shawls, or novels dotted the lawn with colour, and on the garden-front of the house behind, the blinds were mostly drawn. A grey old sun-dial dominated the central sward, and we moved towards it instinctively, as the most human thing in sight. An antick motto ran round it, and with eyes and fingers we struggled at the decipherment.

TIME · TRYETH · TROTHER : spelt out Harold at last.  
" I wonder what that means ? "

I could not enlighten him, nor meet his further questions as to the inner mechanism of the thing, and where you wound it up. I had seen these instruments before, of course ; but had never fully understood their manner of working.

We were still puzzling our heads over the contrivance, when I became aware that Medea herself was moving down the path from the house. Dark-haired, supple, of a figure lightly poised and swayed, but pale and listless—I knew her at once, and having come out to find her, naturally felt no surprise at all. But Harold, who was trying to climb on to the top of the sun-dial, having a cat-like fondness for the summit of things, started and fell prone, barking his chin and filling the pleasance with lamentation

Medea skimmed the ground swallow-like, and in a moment was on her knees comforting him, wiping the dirt out of his chin with her own dainty handkerchief, and vocal with soft murmur of consolation

“You needn’t take on so about him,” I observed politely. “He’ll cry for just one minute, and then he’ll be all right.”

My estimate was justified. At the end of his regulation time Harold stopped crying suddenly, like a clock that had struck its hour ; and with a serene and cheerful countenance wriggled out of Medea’s embrace, and ran for a stone to throw at an intrusive blackbird.

“O you boys !” cried Medea, throwing wide her arms with abandonment. “Where have you dropped from ? How dirty you are ! I’ve been shut up here for a thousand years, and all that time I’ve never seen anyone under a hundred and fifty ! Let’s play at something, at once !”

“Rounders is a good game,” I suggested. “Girls can play at rounders. And we could serve up to the sun-dial here. But you want a bat and a ball, and some more people.”

She struck her hands together tragically. “I haven’t a bat,” she cried, “or a ball, or more people, or anything sensible whatever. Never mind ; let’s play at hide-and-

seek in the kitchen-garden. And we'll race there, up to that walnut-tree ; I haven't run for a century ! ”

She was so easy a victor, nevertheless, that I began to doubt, as I panted behind, whether she had not exaggerated her age by a year or two. She flung herself into hide-and-seek with all the gusto and abandonment of the true artist ; and as she flitted away and reappeared, flushed and laughing divinely, the pale witch-maiden seemed to fall away from her, and she moved rather as that other girl I had read about, snatched from fields of daffodil to reign in shadow below, yet permitted now and again to revisit earth and light and the frank, caressing air.

Tired at last, we strolled back to the old sun-dial, and Harold, who never relinquished a problem unsolved, began afresh, rubbing his finger along the faint incisions. “ *Time tryeth trothe*. Please, I want to know what that means ? ”

Medea's face dropped low over the sun-dial, till it was almost hidden in her fingers “ That's what I'm here for,” she said presently in quite a changed, low voice. “ They shut me up here—they think I'll forget—but I never will—never, never ! And he, too—but I don't know—it is so long—I don't know ! ”

Her face was quite hidden now There was silence again in the old garden. I felt clumsily helpless and awkward. Beyond a vague idea of kicking Harold, nothing remedial seemed to suggest itself.

None of us had noticed the approach of another she-creature—one of the angular and rigid class—how different from our dear comrade ! The years Medea had claimed might well have belonged to her ; she wore mittens, too—a trick I detested in woman. “ Lucy ! ” she said sharply, in a tone with *aunt* writ large over it ; and Medea started up guiltily.

“ You've been crying,” said the newcomer, grimly regarding her through spectacles “ And pray who are these exceedingly dirty little boys ? ”

“ Friends of mine, aunt,” said Medea promptly, with

forced cheerfulness. "I—I've known them a long time. I asked them to come."

The aunt sniffed suspiciously. "You must come indoors, dear," she said, "and lie down. The sun will give you a headache. And you little boys had better run away home to your tea. Remember, you should not come to pay visits without your nursemaid."

Harold had been tugging nervously at my jacket for some time, and I only waited till Medea turned and kissed a white hand to us as she was led away. Then I ran. We gained the boat in safety; and "What an old dragon!" said Harold.

"Wasn't she a beast!" I replied "Fancy the sun giving anyone a headache! But Medea was a real brick. Couldn't we carry her off?"

"We could if Edward was here," said Harold confidently.

The question was, What had become of that defaulting hero? We were not left long in doubt. First, there came down the lane the shrill and wrathful clamour of a female tongue; then Edward, running his best; and then an excited woman hard on his heel. Edward tumbled into the bottom of the boat, gasping "Shove her off!" And shove her off we did, mightily, while the dame abused us from the bank in the self-same accents in which Alfred hurled defiance at the marauding Dane.

"That was just like a bit out of *Westward Ho!*" I remarked approvingly, as we sculled down the stream. "But what had you been doing to her?"

"Hadn't been doing anything," panted Edward, still breathless. "I went up into the village and explored, and it was a very nice one, and the people were very polite. And there was a blacksmith's forge there, and they were shoeing horses, and hoofs fizzled and smoked, and smelt so jolly! I stayed there quite a long time. Then I got thirsty, so I asked that old woman for some water, and while she was getting it her cat came out of the cottage, and looked at me in a nasty sort of way, and said something I didn't like. So I went up to it just to—to teach it manners, and



somehow or other, next minute it was up an apple-tree, spitting, and I was running down the lane with that old thing after me."

Edward was so full of his personal injuries that there was no interesting him in Medea at all. Moreover, the evening was closing in, and it was evident that this cutting-out expedition must be kept for another day. As we neared home, it gradually occurred to us that perhaps the greatest danger was yet to come for the farmer must have missed his boat ere now, and would probably be lying in wait for us near the landing-place. There was no other spot admitting of debarcation on the home side ; if we got out on the other and made for the bridge, we should certainly be seen and cut off. Then it was that I blessed my stars that our elder brother was with us that day. He might be little good at pretending, but in grappling with the stern facts of life he had no equal. Enjoining silence, he waited till we were but a little way from the fated landing-place, and then brought us in to the opposite bank. We scrambled out noiselessly and—the gathering darkness favouring us—crouched behind a willow, while Edward pushed off the empty boat with his foot. The old Argo, borne down by the gentle current, slid and grazed along the rushy bank ; and when she came opposite the suspected ambush, a stream of imprecation told us that our precaution had not been wasted. We wondered, as we listened, where Farmer Larkin, who was bucolically bred and reared, had acquired such range and wealth of vocabulary. Fully realizing at last that his boat was derelict, abandoned, at the mercy of wind and wave—as well as out of his reach—he strode away to the bridge, about a quarter of a mile further down ; and as soon as we heard his boots clumping on the planks we nipped out, recovered the craft, pulled across, and made the faithful vessel fast to her proper moorings. Edward was anxious to wait and exchange courtesies and compliments with the disappointed farmer, when he should confront us on the opposite bank ; but wiser counsels prevailed. It was possible that the piracy was not yet laid

at our particular door : Ulysses, I reminded him, had reason to regret a similar act of bravado, and—were he here—would certainly advise a timely retreat. Edward held but a low opinion of me as a counsellor ; but he had a very solid respect for Ulysses.

## THE ROMAN ROAD

**A**LL the roads of our neighbourhood were cheerful and friendly, having each of them pleasant qualities of their own, but this one seemed different from the others in its masterful suggestion of a serious purpose, speeding you along with a strange uplifting of the heart. The others tempted chiefly with their treasures of hedge and ditch; the rapt surprise of the first lords-and-ladies, the rustle of a field-mouse, the splash of a frog; while cool noses of brother-beasts were pushed at you through gate or gap. A loiterer you had need to be, did you choose one of them; so many were the tiny hands thrust out to detain you, from this side and that. But this one was of a sterner sort, and even in its shedding off of bank and hedgerow as it marched straight and full for the open downs, it seemed to declare its contempt for adventitious trappings to catch the shallow-pated. When the sense of injustice or disappointment was heavy on me, and things were very black within, as on this particular day, the road of character was my choice for that solitary ramble when I turned my back for an afternoon on a world that had unaccountably declared itself against me.

“The Knights’ Road” we children had named it, from a sort of feeling that, if from any quarter at all, it would be down this track we might some day see Lancelot and his peers come pacing on their great war-horses; supposing that any of the stout band still survived, in nooks and unexplored places. Grown-up people sometimes spoke of it as the “Pilgrims’ Way”; but I didn’t know much about pilgrims—except Walter in the Horselberg story. Him I sometimes saw breaking with haggard eyes out of yonder copse, and calling to the pilgrims as they hurried along on

their desperate march to the Holy City, where peace and pardon were awaiting them. "All roads lead to Rome," I had once heard somebody say; and I had taken the remark very seriously, of course, and puzzled over it many days. There must have been some mistake, I concluded at last; but of one road at least I intuitively felt it to be true. And my belief was clinched by something that fell from Miss Smedley during a history-lesson, about a strange road that ran right down the middle of England till it reached the coast, and then began again in France, just opposite, and so on undeviating, through city and vineyard, right from the misty Highlands to the Eternal City. Uncorroborated, any statement of Miss Smedley's usually fell on incredulous ears; but here, with the road itself in evidence she seemed, once in a way, to have strayed into truth.

Rome! It was fascinating to think that it lay at the other end of this white ribbon that rolled itself off from my feet over the distant downs. I was not quite so uninstructed as to imagine I could reach it that afternoon; but some day, I thought, if things went on being as unpleasant as they were now—some day, when Aunt Eliza had gone on a visit,—some day, we would see.

I tried to imagine what it would be like when I got there. The Coliseum I knew, of course, from a woodcut in the history-book: so to begin with I plumped that down in the middle. The rest had to be patched up from the little grey market-town where twice a year we went to have our hair cut; hence, in the result, Vespasian's amphitheatre was approached by muddy little streets, wherein the Red Lion and the Blue Boar, with Somebody's Entire along their front, and "Commercial Room" on their windows; the doctor's house, of substantial red-brick; and the façade of the New Wesleyan chapel, which we thought very fine, were the chief architectural ornaments: while the Roman populace potted about in smocks and corduroys, twisting the tails of Roman calves and inviting each other to beer in musical Wessex. From Rome I drifted on to other cities, faintly heard of—Damascus, Brighton (Aunt Eliza's ideal),

Athens, and Glasgow, whose glories the gardener sang ; but there was a certain sameness in my conception of all of them : that Wesleyan chapel would keep cropping up everywhere. It was easier to go a-building among those dream-cities where no limitations were imposed, and one was sole architect, with a free hand. Down a delectable street of cloud-built palaces I was mentally pacing, when I happened upon the Artist.

He was seated at work by the roadside, at a point whence the cool large spaces of the downs, juniper-studded, swept grandly westwards. His attributes proclaimed him of the artist tribe · besides, he wore knickerbockers like myself,—a garb confined, I was aware, to boys and artists. I knew I was not to bother him with questions, nor look over his shoulder and breathe in his ear—they didn't like it, this *genus irritabile*. But there was nothing about staring in my code of instructions, the point having somehow been overlooked . so, squatting down on the grass, I devoted myself to the passionate absorbing of every detail. At the end of five minutes there was not a button on him that I could not have passed an examination in ; and the wearer himself of that homespun suit was probably less familiar with its pattern and texture than I was. Once he looked up, nodded, half held out his tobacco pouch, mechanically as it were, then, returning it to his pocket, resumed his work, and I my mental photography.

After another five minutes or so had passed, he remarked, without looking my way “ Fine afternoon we're having : going far to-day ? ”

“ No, I'm not going any farther than this,” I replied ; “ I was thinking of going on to Rome . but I've put it off.”

“ Pleasant place, Rome,” he murmured : “ you'll like it ” It was some minutes later that he added : “ But I wouldn't go just now, if I were you : too jolly hot.”

“ You haven't been to Rome, have you ? ” I inquired.

“ Rather,” he replied briefly · “ I live there ”

This was too much, and my jaw dropped as I struggled to grasp the fact that I was sitting there talking to a fellow who

lived in Rome. Speech was out of the question : besides I had other things to do. Ten solid minutes had I already spent in an examination of him as a mere stranger and artist ; and now the whole thing had to be done over again, from the changed point of view. So I began afresh, at the crown of his soft hat, and worked down to his solid British shoes, this time investing everything with the new Roman halo ; and at last I managed to get out : " But you don't really live there, do you ? " never doubting the fact, but wanting to hear it repeated.

" Well," he said, good-naturedly overlooking the slight rudeness of my query, " I live there as much as I live anywhere. About half the year sometimes. I've got a sort of a shanty there. You must come and see it some day."

" But do you live anywhere else as well ? " I went on, feeling the forbidden tide of questions surging up within me.

" O yes, all over the place," was his vague reply. " And I've got a diggings somewhere off Piccadilly."

" Where's that ? " I inquired.

" Where's what ? " said he. " O, Piccadilly ! It's in London."

" Have you a large garden ? " I asked ; " and how many pigs have you got ? "

" I've got no garden at all," he replied sadly, " and they don't allow me to keep pigs, though I'd like to, awfully. It's very hard."

" But what do you do all day, then," I cried, " and where do you go and play, without any garden, or pigs, or things ? "

" When I want to play," he said gravely, " I have to go and play in the street ; but it's poor fun, I grant you. There's a goat, though, not far off and sometimes I talk to him when I'm feeling lonely ; but he's very proud."

" Goats *are* proud," I admitted. " There's one lives near here, and if you say anything to him at all, he hits you in the wind with his head. You know what it feels like when a fellow hits you in the wind ? "

Athens, and Glasgow, whose glories the gardener sang ; but there was a certain sameness in my conception of all of them : that Wesleyan chapel would keep cropping up everywhere. It was easier to go a-building among those dream-cities where no limitations were imposed, and one was sole architect, with a free hand. Down a delectable street of cloud-built palaces I was mentally pacing, when I happened upon the Artist.

He was seated at work by the roadside, at a point whence the cool large spaces of the downs, juniper-studded, swept grandly westwards. His attributes proclaimed him of the artist tribe—besides, he wore knickerbockers like myself,—a garb confined, I was aware, to boys and artists. I knew I was not to bother him with questions, nor look over his shoulder and breathe in his ear—they didn't like it, this *genus irritabile*. But there was nothing about staring in my code of instructions, the point having somehow been overlooked : so, squatting down on the grass, I devoted myself to the passionate absorbing of every detail. At the end of five minutes there was not a button on him that I could not have passed an examination in ; and the wearer himself of that homespun suit was probably less familiar with its pattern and texture than I was. Once he looked up, nodded, half held out his tobacco pouch, mechanically as it were, then, returning it to his pocket, resumed his work, and I my mental photography.

After another five minutes or so had passed, he remarked, without looking my way. "Fine afternoon we're having : going far to-day ?"

"No, I'm not going any farther than this," I replied ; "I was thinking of going on to Rome : but I've put it off."

"Pleasant place, Rome," he murmured : "you'll like it." It was some minutes later that he added : "But I wouldn't go just now, if I were you : too jolly hot."

"You haven't been to Rome, have you ?" I inquired.

"Rather," he replied briefly. "I live there."

This was too much, and my jaw dropped as I struggled to grasp the fact that I was sitting there talking to a fellow who

lived in Rome. Speech was out of the question : besides I had other things to do. Ten solid minutes had I already spent in an examination of him as a mere stranger and artist ; and now the whole thing had to be done over again, from the changed point of view. So I began afresh, at the crown of his soft hat, and worked down to his solid British shoes, this time investing everything with the new Roman halo ; and at last I managed to get out - " But you don't really live there, do you ? " never doubting the fact, but wanting to hear it repeated.

" Well," he said, good-naturedly overlooking the slight rudeness of my query, " I live there as much as I live anywhere. About half the year sometimes. I've got a sort of a shanty there. You must come and see it some day."

" But do you live anywhere else as well ? " I went on, feeling the forbidden tide of questions surging up within me.

" O yes, all over the place," was his vague reply. " And I've got a diggings somewhere off Piccadilly."

" Where's that ? " I inquired.

" Where's what ? " said he. " O, Piccadilly ! It's in London "

" Have you a large garden ? " I asked ; " and how many pigs have you got ? "

" I've got no garden at all," he replied sadly, " and they don't allow me to keep pigs, though I'd like to, awfully. It's very hard."

" But what do you do all day, then," I cried, " and where do you go and play, without any garden, or pigs, or things ? "

" When I want to play," he said gravely, " I have to go and play in the street ; but it's poor fun, I grant you. There's a goat, though, not far off and sometimes I talk to him when I'm feeling lonely ; but he's very proud."

" Goats *are* proud," I admitted. " There's one lives near here, and if you say anything to him at all, he hits you in the wind with his head. You know what it feels like when a fellow hits you in the wind ? "



"I do, well," he replied, in a tone of proper melancholy, and painted on.

"And have you been to any other places," I began again presently, "besides Rome and Piccy-what's-his-name?"

"Heaps," he said. "I'm a sort of Ulysses—seen men and cities, you know. In fact, about the only place I never got to was the Fortunate Island."

I began to like this man. He answered your questions briefly and to the point, and never tried to be funny. I felt I could be confidential with him.

"Wouldn't you like," I inquired, "to find a city without any people in it at all?"

He looked puzzled. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand," said he.

"I mean," I went on eagerly, "a city where you walk in at the gates, and the shops are all full of beautiful things, and the houses furnished as grand as can be, and there isn't anybody there whatever! And you go into the shops, and take anything you want—chocolates and magic-lanterns and injurubber balls—and there's nothing to pay; and you choose your own house and live there and do just as you like, and never go to bed unless you want to!"

The artist laid down his brush. "That *would* be a nice city," he said. "Better than Rome. You can't do that sort of thing in Rome—or in Piccadilly either. But I fear it's one of the places I've never been to."

"And you'd ask your friends," I went on, warming to my subject; "only those you really like, of course; and they'd each have a house to themselves—there'd be lots of houses,—and there wouldn't be any relations at all, unless they promised they'd be pleasant; and if they weren't they'd have to go."

"So you wouldn't have any relations?" said the artist. "Well, perhaps you're right. We have tastes in common, I see."

"I'd have Harold," I said reflectively, "and Charlotte. They'd like it awfully. The others are getting too old. O, and Martha—I'd have Martha to cook and wash up

and do things. You'd like Martha. She's ever so much nicer than Aunt Eliza. She's my idea of a real lady."

"Then I'm sure I should like her," he replied heartily, "and when I come to—what do you call this city of yours? Nephelo—something, did you say?"

"I—I don't know," I replied timidly. "I'm afraid it hasn't got a name—yet."

The artist gazed out over the downs. "'The poet says, dear city of Cecrops,'" he said softly to himself, "'and wilt not thou say, dear city of Zeus?' That's from Marcus Aurelius," he went on, turning again to his work. "You don't know him, I suppose; you will some day."

"Who's he?" I inquired.

"O, just another fellow who lived in Rome," he replied, dabbing away.

"O dear!" I cried disconsolately. "What a lot of people seem to live at Rome, and I've never even been there! But I think I'd like *my* city best."

"And so would I," he replied with unction. "But Marcus Aurelius wouldn't, you know"

"Then we won't invite him," I said; "will we?"

"I won't if you won't," said he. And that point being settled, we were silent for a while.

"Do you know," he said presently, "I've met one or two fellows from time to time, who have been to a city like yours—perhaps it was the same one. They won't talk much about it—only broken hints, now and then; but they've been there sure enough. They don't seem to care about anything in particular—and everything's the same to them, rough or smooth; and sooner or later they slip off and disappear; and you never see them again. Gone back, I suppose."

"Of course," said I. "Don't see what they ever came away for, I wouldn't. To be told you've broken things when you haven't, and stopped having tea with the servants in the kitchen, and not allowed to have a dog to sleep with you. But *I've* known people, too, who've gone there."

The artist stared, but without incivility.

"Well, there's Lancelot," I went on. "The book says he died, but it never seemed to read right, somehow. He just went away, like Arthur. And Crusoe, when he got tired of wearing clothes and being respectable. And all the nice men in the stories who don't marry the Princess, 'cos only one man ever gets married in a book, you know. They'll be there!"

"And the men who never come off," he said, "who try like the rest, but get knocked out, or somehow miss—or break down or get bowled over in the *mêlée*—and get no Princess, nor even a second-class kingdom—some of them'll be there, I hope?"

"Yes, if you like," I replied, not quite understanding him, "if they're friends of yours, we'll ask 'em, of course."

"What a time we shall have!" said the artist reflectively, "and how shocked old Marcus Aurelius will be!"

The shadows had lengthened uncannily, a tide of golden haze was flooding the grey-green surface of the downs, and the artist began to put his traps together, preparatory to a move. I felt very low—we would have to part, it seemed, just as we were getting on so well together. Then he stood up, and he was very straight and tall, and the sunset was in his hair and beard as he stood there, high over me. He took my hand like an equal. "I've enjoyed our conversation very much," he said. "That was an interesting subject you started, and we haven't half exhausted it. We shall meet again, I hope?"

"Of course we shall," I replied, surprised that there should be any doubt about it.

"In Rome perhaps?" said he.

"Yes, in Rome," I answered, "or Piccy-the-other-place, or somewhere."

"Or else," said he, "in that other city—when we've found the way there. And I'll look out for you, and you'll sing out as soon as you see me. And we'll go down the street arm-in-arm, and into all the shops, and then I'll choose my house, and you'll choose your house, and we'll live there like princes and good fellows."

"O, but you'll stay in my house, won't you?" I cried; "I wouldn't ask everybody; but I'll ask *you*."

He affected to consider a moment; then "Right!" he said: "I believe you mean it, and I *will* come and stay with you. I won't go to anybody else, if they ask me ever so much. And I'll stay quite a long time, too, and I won't be any trouble."

Upon this compact we parted, and I went downheartedly from the man who understood me, back to the house where I never could do anything right. How was it that everything seemed natural and sensible to him, which these uncles, vicars, and other grown-up men took for the merest tomfoolery? Well, he would explain this, and many another thing, when we met again. The Knight's Road! How it always brought consolation! Was he possibly one of those vanished knights I had been looking for so long? Perhaps he would be in armour next time—why not? He would look well in armour, I thought. And I would take care to get there first, and see the sunlight flash and play on his helmet and shield, as he rode up the High Street of the Golden City

Meantime, there only remained the finding it. An easy matter.

## THE SECRET DRAWER

**I**T must surely have served as a boudoir for the ladies of old time, this little used, rarely entered chamber where the neglected old bureau stood. There was something very feminine in the faint hues of its faded brocades, in the rose and blue of such bits of china as yet remained, and in the delicate old-world fragrance of pot-pourri from the great bowl,—blue and white, with funny holes in its cover,—that stood on the bureau's flat top. Modern aunts disdained this out-of-the-way, backwater, upstairs room, preferring to do their accounts and grapple with their correspondence in some central position more in the whirl of things, whence one eye could be kept on the carriage-drive, while the other was alert for malingering servants and marauding children. Those aunts of a former generation—I sometimes felt—would have suited our habits better. But even by us children, to whom few places were private or reserved, the room was visited but rarely. To be sure, there was *nothing* particular in it that we coveted or required. Only a few spindle-legged, gilt-backed chairs,—an old harp on which, so the legend ran, Aunt Eliza herself used once to play, in years remote, unchronicled ; a corner-cupboard with a few pieces of china ; and the old bureau. But one other thing the room possessed, peculiar to itself ; a certain sense of privacy—a power of making the intruder feel that he *was* intruding—perhaps even a faculty of hinting that someone might have been sitting on those chairs, writing at the bureau, or fingering the china, just a second before one entered. No such violent word as “haunted” could possibly apply to this pleasant old-fashioned chamber, which indeed we all rather liked ;

but there was no doubt it was reserved and stand-offish, keeping itself to itself.

Uncle Thomas was the first to draw my attention to the possibilities of the old bureau. He was pottering about the house one afternoon, having ordered me to keep at his heels for company—he was a man who hated to be left one minute alone—when his eye fell on it. “H’m ! Sheraton !” he remarked. (He had a smattering of most things, this uncle, especially the vocabularies.) Then he let down the flap, and examined the empty pigeon-holes and dusty panelling. “Fine bit of inlay,” he went on. “good work, all of it. I know the sort. There’s a secret drawer in there somewhere.” Then as I breathlessly drew near, he suddenly exclaimed : “By Jove, I do want to smoke !” And, wheeling round, he abruptly fled for the garden, leaving me with the cup dashed from my lips. What a strange thing, I mused, was this smoking, that takes a man suddenly, be he in the court, the camp, or the grove, grips him like an Afreet, and whirls him off to do its imperious behests ! Would it be even so with myself, I wondered, in those unknown grown-up years to come ?

But I had no time to waste in vain speculations. My whole being was still vibrating to those magic syllables “secret drawer” ; and that particular chord had been touched that never fails to thrill responsive to such words as *cave*, *trap-door*, *sliding-panel*, *bullion*, *ingots*, or *Spanish dollars*. For, besides its own special bliss, who ever heard of a secret drawer with nothing in it ? And O I did want money so badly ! I mentally ran over the list of demands which were pressing me the most imperiously.

First, there was the pipe I wanted to give George Jannaway. George, who was Martha’s young man, was a shepherd, and a great ally of mine ; and the last fair he was at, when he bought his sweetheart fairings, as a right-minded shepherd should, he had purchased a lovely snake expressly for me ; one of the wooden sort, with joints, wagging deliciously in the hand ; with yellow spots on a green ground, sticky and strong-smelling, as a fresh-painted

snake ought to be ; and with a red-flannel tongue pasted cunningly into its jaws. I loved it much, and took it to bed with me every night, till what time its spinal cord was loosed and it fell apart, and went the way of all mortal joys. I thought it very nice of George to think of me at the fair, and that's why I wanted to give him a pipe. When the young year was chill and lambing-time was on, George inhabited a little wooden house on wheels, far out on the wintry downs, and saw no faces but such as were sheepish and woolly and mute ; and when he and Martha were married, she was going to carry his dinner out to him every day, two miles ; and after it, perhaps he would smoke my pipe. It seemed an idyllic sort of existence, for both the parties concerned ; but a pipe of quality, a pipe fitted to be part of a life such as this, could not be procured (so Martha informed me) for a smaller sum than eighteenpence. And meantime——!

Then there was the fourpence I owed Edward ; not that he was bothering me for it, but I knew he was in need of it himself, to pay back Selina, who wanted it to make up a sum of two shillings, to buy Harold an ironclad for his approaching birthday,—H M.S. *Majestic*, now lying uselessly careened in the toyshop window, just when her country had such sore need of her.

And then there was that boy in the village who had caught a young squirrel, and I had never yet possessed one, and he wanted a shilling for it, but I knew that for ninepence in cash—but what was the good of these sorry threadbare reflections ? I had wants enough to exhaust any possible find of bullion, even if it amounted to half a sovereign. My only hope now lay in the magic drawer, and here I was, standing and letting the precious minutes slip by ! Whether “findings” of this sort could, morally speaking, be considered “keepings,” was a point that did not occur to me.

The room was very still as I approached the bureau ; possessed, it seemed to be, by a sort of hush of expectation. The faint odour of orris-root that floated forth as I let down the flap, seemed to identify itself with the yellows and

browns of the old wood, till hue and scent were of one quality and interchangeable. Even so, ere this, the pot-pourri had mixed itself with the tints of the old brocade, and brocade and pot-pourri had long been one. With expectant fingers I explored the empty pigeon-holes and sounded the depths of the softly-sliding drawers. No books that I knew of gave any general recipe for a quest like this ; but the glory, should I succeed unaided, would be all the greater.

To him who is destined to arrive, the fates never fail to afford, on the way, their small encouragements. In less than two minutes, I had come across a rusty button-hook. This was truly magnificent. In the nursery there existed, indeed, a general button-hook, common to either sex ; but none of us possessed a private and special button-hook, to lend or to refuse as suited the high humour of the moment. I pocketed the treasure carefully, and proceeded. At the back of another drawer, three old foreign stamps told me I was surely on the high-road to fortune.

Following on these bracing incentives, came a dull blank period of unrewarded search. In vain I removed all the drawers and felt over every inch of the smooth surfaces, from front to back. Never a knob, spring or projection met the thrilling finger-tips ; unyielding the old bureau stood, stoutly guarding its secret, if secret it really had. I began to grow weary and disheartened. This was not the first time that Uncle Thomas had proved shallow, uninformed, a guide into blind alleys where the echoes mocked you. Was it any good persisting longer ? Was anything any good whatever ? In my mind I began to review past disappointments, and life seemed one long record of failure and of non-arrival. Disillusioned and depressed, I left my work and went to the window. The light was ebbing from the room, and seemed outside to be collecting itself on the horizon for its concentrated effort of sunset. Far down the garden, Uncle Thomas was holding Edward in the air reversed, and smacking him. Edward, gurgling hysterically, was striking blind fists in the direction where he judged his



uncle's stomach should rightly be ; the contents of his pockets—a motley show—were strewing the lawn. Somehow, though I had been put through a similar performance myself an hour or two ago, it all seemed very far away and cut off from me.

Westwards the clouds were massing themselves in a low violet bank ; below them, to north and south, as far round as eye could reach, a narrow streak of gold ran out and stretched away, straight along the horizon. Somewhere very far off, a horn was blowing, clear and thin ; it sounded like the golden streak grown audible, while the gold seemed the visible sound. It pricked my ebbing courage, this blended strain of music and colour. I turned for a last effort ; and Fortune thereupon, as if half-ashamed of the unworthy game she had been playing with me, relented, opening her clenched fist. Hardly had I put my hand once more to the obdurate wood, when with a sort of small sigh, almost a sob—as it were—of relief, the secret drawer sprang open.

I drew it out and carried it to the window, to examine it in the failing light. Too hopeless had I gradually grown, in my dispiriting search, to expect very much ; and yet at a glance I saw that my basket of glass lay in shivers at my feet. No ingots nor dollars were here, to crown me the little Monte Cristo of a week. Outside, the distant horn had ceased its gnat-song, the gold was paling to primrose, and everything was lonely and still. Within, my confident little castles were tumbling down like so many card-houses, leaving me stripped of estate, both real and personal, and dominated by the depressing reaction.

And yet,—as I looked at the small collection that lay within that drawer of disillusion, some warmth crept back to my heart as I recognized that a kindred spirit to my own had been at the making of it. Two tarnished gilt buttons—naval, apparently—a portrait of a monarch unknown to me, cut from some antique print and deftly coloured by hand in just my own bold style of brush-work—some foreign copper coins, thicker and clumsier of make than those I

hoarded myself—and a list of bird's-eggs, with names of the places where they had been found. Also, a ferret's muzzle, and a twist of tarry string, still faintly aromatic ! It was a real boy's hoard, then, that I had happened upon. He too had found out the secret drawer, this happy-starred young person ; and here he had stowed away his treasures, one by one, and had cherished them secretly awhile ; and then—what ? Well, one would never know now the reason why these priceless possessions still lay here unreclaimed ; but across the void stretch of years I seemed to touch hands a moment with my little comrade of seasons—how many seasons ?—long since dead.

I restored the drawer, with its contents, to the trusty bureau, and heard the spring click with a certain satisfaction. Some other boy, perhaps, would some day release that spring again. I trusted he would be equally appreciative. As I opened the door to go, I could hear, from the nursery at the end of the passage, shouts and yells, telling that the hunt was up. Bears, apparently, or bandits, were on the evening bill of fare, judging by the character of the noises. In another minute I would be in the thick of it, in all the warmth and light and laughter. And yet—what a long way off it all seemed, both in space and time, to me yet lingering on the threshold of that old-world chamber !

## THE BLUE ROOM

THAT nature has her moments of sympathy with man has been noted often enough,—and generally as a new discovery. To us, who had never known any other condition of things, it seemed entirely right and fitting that the wind sang and sobbed in the poplar tops, and, in the lulls of it, sudden spirts of rain spattered the already dusty roads, on that blustering March day when Edward and I awaited, on the station platform, the arrival of the new tutor. Needless to say, this arrangement had been planned by an aunt, from some fond idea that our shy, innocent young natures would unfold themselves during the walk from the station, and that, on the revelation of each other's more solid qualities that must inevitably ensue, an enduring friendship, springing from mutual respect, might be firmly based. A pretty dream,—nothing more. For Edward, who foresaw that the brunt of tutorial oppression would have to be borne by him, was sulky, monosyllabic, and determined to be as negatively disagreeable as good manners would permit. It was therefore evident that I would have to be spokesman and purveyor of hollow civilities, and I was none the more amiable on that account ; all courtesies, welcomes, explanations, and other court-chamberlain kind of business, being my special aversion. There was much of the tempestuous March weather in the hearts of both of us, as we sullenly glowered along the carriage-windows of the slackening train

One is apt, however, to misjudge the special difficulties of a situation ; and the reception proved, after all, an easy and informal matter. In a trainful so uniformly bucolic, a tutor was readily recognizable ; and his portmanteau had been consigned to the luggage-cart, and his person

conveyed into the lane, before I had discharged one of my carefully considered sentences. I breathed more easily, and looking up at our new friend as we stepped out together, remembered that we had been counting on something altogether more arid, scholastic, and severe. A boyish eager face and a petulant *pince-nez*—untidy hair—a head of constant quick turns like a robin's, and a voice that kept breaking into alto—these were all very strange and new, but not in the least terrible.

He proceeded jerkily through the village, with glances on this side and that; and "Charming," he broke out presently; "quite too charming and delightful!"

I had not counted on this sort of thing, and glanced for help to Edward, who, hands in pockets, looked grimly down his nose. He had taken his line, and meant to stick to it.

Meantime our friend had made an imaginary spy-glass out of his fist, and was squinting through it at something I could not perceive. "What an exquisite bit!" he burst out. "Fifteenth century—no—yes it is!"

I began to feel puzzled, not to say alarmed. It reminded me of the butcher in the *Arabian Nights*, whose common joints, displayed on the shop-front, took to a startled public the appearance of dismembered humanity. This man seemed to see the strangest things in our dull, familiar surroundings.

"Ah!" he broke out again, as we jogged on between hedgerows: "and that field now—backed by the downs—with the rain-cloud brooding over it,—that's all David Cox—every bit of it!"

"That field belongs to Farmer Larkin," I explained politely; for of course he could not be expected to know. "I'll take you over to Farmer Cox's to-morrow, if he's a friend of yours; but there's nothing to see there."

Edward, who was hanging sullenly behind, made a face at me, as if to say, "What sort of lunatic have we got here?"

"It has the true pastoral character, this country of

yours," went on our enthusiast : " with just that added touch in cottage and farmstead, relics of a bygone art, which makes our English landscape so divine, so unique ! "

Really this grasshopper was becoming a burden ! These familiar fields and farms, of which we knew every blade and stick, had done nothing that I knew of to be bespattered with adjectives in this way. I had never thought of them as divine, unique, or anything else. They were—well, they were just themselves, and there was an end of it. Despairingly I jogged Edward in the ribs, as a sign to start rational conversation, but he only grinned and continued obdurate.

" You can see the house now," I remarked presently ; " and that's Selina, chasing the donkey in the paddock. Or is it the donkey chasing Selina ? I can't quite make out ; but it's *them*, anyhow."

Needless to say, he exploded with a full charge of adjectives. " Exquisite ! " he rapped out ; " so mellow and harmonious ! and so entirely in keeping ! " ( I could see from Edward's face that he was thinking who ought to be in keeping ) " Such possibilities of romance, now, in those old gables ! "

" If you mean the garrets," I said, " there's a lot of old furniture in them ; and one is generally full of apples ; and the bats get in sometimes, under the eaves, and flop about till we go up with hair-brushes and things and drive 'em out ; but there's nothing else in them that I know of."

" O, but there must be more than bats," he cried. " Don't tell me there are no ghosts. I shall be deeply disappointed if there aren't any ghosts "

I did not think it worth while to reply, feeling really unequal to this sort of conversation. Besides, we were nearing the house, when my task would be ended. Aunt Eliza met us at the door, and in the cross-fire of adjectives that ensued—both of them talking at once, as grown-up folk have a habit of doing—we two slipped round to the back of the house and speedily put several broad acres between us and civilization, for fear of being ordered in to

tea in the drawing-room. By the time we returned our new importation had gone up to dress for dinner, so till the morrow at least we were free of him.

Meanwhile the March wind, after dropping a while at sundown, had been steadily increasing in volume ; and although I fell asleep at my usual hour, about midnight I was wakened by the stress and the cry of it. In the bright moonlight, wind-swung branches tossed and swayed eerily across the blinds ; there was rumbling in chimneys, whistling in keyholes, and everywhere a clamour and a call. Sleep was out of the question, and, sitting up in bed, I looked round. Edward sat up too. "I was wondering when you were going to wake," he said. "It's no good trying to sleep through this I vote we get up and do something "

"I'm game," I replied. "Let's play at being in a ship at sea" (the plaint of the old house under the buffeting wind suggested this, naturally) ; "and we can be wrecked on an island, or left on a raft, whichever you choose ; but I like an island best myself, because there's more things on it."

Edward on reflection negatived the idea. "It would make too much noise," he pointed out. "There's no fun playing at ships, unless you can make a jolly good row."

The door creaked, and a small figure in white slipped cautiously in. "Thought I heard you talking," said Charlotte. "We don't like it, we're afraid—Selina too ! She'll be here in a minute. She's putting on her new dressing-gown she's so proud of."

His arms round his knees, Edward cogitated deeply until Selina appeared, barefooted, and looking slim and tall in the new dressing-gown. Then, "Look here," he exclaimed ; "now we're all together, I vote we go and explore !"

"You're always wanting to explore," I said. "What on earth is there to explore for in this house ?"

"Biscuits !" said the inspired Edward.

"Hooray ! Come on !" chimed in Harold, sitting up suddenly. He had been awake all the time, but had

been shamming asleep, lest he should be fagged to do anything.

It was indeed a fact, as Edward had remembered, that our thoughtless elders occasionally left the biscuits out, a prize for the night-walking adventurer with nerves of steel.

Edward tumbled out of bed and pulled a baggy old pair of knickerbockers over his bare shanks. Then he girt himself with a belt, into which he thrust, on the one side a large wooden pistol, on the other an old single-stick ; and finally he donned a big slouch-hat—once an uncle's—that we used for playing Guy Fawkes and Charles-the-Second-up-a-tree in. Whatever the audience, Edward, if possible, always dressed for his parts with care and conscientiousness ; while Harold and I, true Elizabethans, cared little about the mounting of the piece, so long as the real dramatic heart of it beat sound.

Our commander now enjoined on us a silence deep as the grave, reminding us that Aunt Eliza usually slept with an open door, past which we had to file

“ But we'll take the short cut through the Blue Room,” said the wary Selina.

“ Of course,” said Edward approvingly. “ I forgot about that Now then ! You lead the way ! ”

The Blue Room had in prehistoric times been added to by taking in a superfluous passage, and so not only had the advantage of two doors, but also enabled us to get to the head of the stairs without passing the chamber wherein our dragon-aunt lay couched. It was rarely occupied, except when a casual uncle came down for the night. We entered in noiseless file, the room being plunged in darkness, except for a bright strip of moonlight on the floor, across which we must pass for our exit. On this our leading lady chose to pause, seizing the opportunity to study the hang of her new dressing-gown. Greatly satisfied thereat, she proceeded, after the feminine fashion, to peacock and to pose, pacing a minuet down the moonlit patch with an imaginary partner. This was too much for Edward's histrionic instincts, and after a moment's pause he drew his

single-stick, and, with flourishes meet for the occasion, strode on to the stage. A struggle ensued on approved lines, at the end of which Selina was stabbed slowly and with unction, and her corpse borne from the chamber by the ruthless cavalier. The rest of us rushed after in a clump, with capers and gesticulations of delight; the special charm of the performance lying in the necessity for its being carried out with the dumbest of dumb shows.

Once out on the dark landing, the noise of the storm without told us that we had exaggerated the necessity for silence; so, grasping the tails of each other's night-gowns, even as Alpine climbers rope themselves together in perilous places, we fared stoutly down the staircase-moraine, and across the grim glacier of the hall, to where a faint glimmer from the half-open door of the drawing-room beckoned to us like friendly hostel-lights. Entering, we found that our thriftless seniors had left the sound red heart of a fire, easily coaxed into a cheerful blaze; and biscuits—a plateful—smiled at us in an encouraging sort of way, together with the halves of a lemon, already squeezed, but still suckable. The biscuits were righteously shared, the lemon segments passed from mouth to mouth; and as we squatted round the fire, its genial warmth consoling our unclad limbs, we realized that so many nocturnal perils had not been braved in vain.

"It's a funny thing," said Edward, as we chatted, "how I hate this room in the daytime. It always means having your face washed, and your hair brushed, and talking silly company talk. But to-night it's really quite jolly. Looks different, somehow."

"I never can make out," I said, "what people come here to tea for. They can have their own tea at home if they like—they're not poor people—with jam and things, and drink out of their saucer, and suck their fingers and enjoy themselves; but they come here from a long way off, and sit up straight with their feet off the bars of their chairs, and have one cup, and talk the same sort of stuff every time."



Selina sniffed disdainfully. "You don't know anything about it," she said. "In society you have to call on each other. It's the proper thing to do."

"Pooh! *you're* not in society," said Edward politely; "and, what's more, you never will be."

"Yes, I shall, some day," retorted Selina; "but I shan't ask you to come and see me, so there!"

"Wouldn't come if you did," growled Edward.

"Well, you won't get the chance," rejoined our sister, claiming her right of the last word. There was no heat about these little amenities, which made up—as understood by us—the art of polite conversation.

"I don't like society people," put in Harold from the sofa, where he was sprawling at full length—a sight the daylight hours would have blushed to witness. "There were some of 'em here this afternoon, when you two had gone off to the station. Oh, and I found a dead mouse on the lawn, and I wanted to skin it, but I wasn't sure I knew how, by myself; and they came out into the garden, and patted my head—I wish people wouldn't do that—and one of 'em asked me to pick her a flower. Don't know why she couldn't pick it herself; but I said, 'All right, I will if you'll hold my mouse.' But she screamed, and threw it away; and Augustus (the cat) got it, and ran away with it. I believe it was really his mouse all the time, 'cos he'd been looking about as if he had lost something, so I wasn't angry with *him*. But what did *she* want to throw away my mouse for?"

"You have to be careful with mice," reflected Edward; "they're such slippery things. Do you remember we were playing with a dead mouse once on the piano, and the mouse was Robinson Crusoe, and the piano was the island, and somehow Crusoe slipped down inside the island, into its works, and we couldn't get him out, though we tried rakes and all sorts of things, till the tuner came. And that wasn't till a week after, and then——"

Here Charlotte who had been nodding solemnly, fell over into the fender; and we realized that the wind had

dropped at last, and the house was lapped in a great stillness. Our vacant beds seemed to be calling to us imperiously ; and we were all glad when Edward gave the signal for retreat. At the top of the staircase Harold unexpectedly turned mutinous, insisting on his right to slide down the banisters in a free country. Circumstances did not allow of argument ; I suggested frog's-marching instead, and accordingly frog's-marched he was, the procession passing solemnly across the moonlit Blue Room, with Harold horizontal and limply submissive. Snug in bed at last, I was just slipping off into slumber when I heard Edward explode, with chuckle and snort.

"By Jove !" he said ; "I forgot all about it The new tutor's sleeping in the Blue Room !"

"Lucky he didn't wake up and catch us," I grunted drowsily ; and, without another thought on the matter, we both sank into well-earned repose

Next morning, coming down to breakfast braced to grapple with fresh adversity, we were surprised to find our garrulous friend of the previous day—he was late in making his appearance—strangely silent and (apparently) pre-occupied. Having polished off our porridge, we ran out to feed the rabbits, explaining to them that a beast of a tutor would prevent their enjoying so much of our society as formerly

On returning to the house at the fated hour appointed for study, we were thunderstruck to see the station-cart disappearing down the drive, freighted with our new acquaintance. Aunt Eliza was brutally uncommunicative ; but she was overheard to remark casually that she thought the man must be a lunatic. In this theory we were only too ready to concur, dismissing thereafter the whole matter from our minds

Some weeks later it happened that Uncle Thomas, while paying us a flying visit, produced from his pocket a copy of the latest weekly, *Psyche · a Journal of the Unseen* ; and proceeded laboriously to rid himself of much incomprehensible humour, apparently at our expense. We bore

it patiently, with the forced grin demanded by convention, anxious to get at the source of inspiration, which it presently appeared lay in a paragraph circumstantially describing our modest and humdrum habitation. "Case m," it began. "The following particulars were communicated by a young member of the Society, of undoubted probity and earnestness, and are a chronicle of actual and recent experience." A fairly accurate description of the house followed, with details that were unmistakable ; but to this there succeeded a flood of meaningless drivel about apparitions, nightly vists, and the like, writ in a manner betokening a disordered mind, coupled with a feeble imagination. The fellow was not even original. All the old material was there—the storm at night, the haunted chamber, the white lady, the murder re-enacted, and so on—already worn threadbare in many a Christmas Number. No one was able to make head or tail of the stuff, or of its connexion with our quiet mansion ; and yet Edward, who had always suspected the fellow, persisted in maintaining that our tutor of a brief span was, somehow or other, at the bottom of it.

## THE TWENTY-FIRST OF OCTOBER

**I**N the matter of general culture and attainments, we youngsters stood on pretty level ground. True, it was always happening that one of us would be singled out at any moment, freakishly, and without regard to his own preferences, to wrestle with the inflections of some idiotic language long rightly dead ; while another, from some fancied artistic tendency which always failed to justify itself, might be told off without warning to hammer out scales and exercises, and to bedew the senseless keys with tears of weariness or of revolt. But in subjects common to either sex, and held to be necessary even for him whose ambition soared no higher than to crack a whip in a circus-ring—in geography, for instance, arithmetic, or the weary doings of kings and queens—each would have scorned to excel. And, indeed, whatever our individual gifts, a general dogged determination to shirk and to evade kept us all at much the same dead level,—a level of ignorance tempered by insubordination.

Fortunately there existed a wide range of subjects, of healthier tone than those already enumerated, in which we were free to choose for ourselves, and which we would have scorned to consider education ; and in these we freely followed each his own particular line, often attaining an amount of special knowledge which struck our ignorant elders as simply uncanny. For Edward, the uniforms, accoutrements, colours, and mottoes of the regiments composing the British Army had a special glamour. In the matter of facings he was simply faultless ; among chevrons, badges, medals, and stars, he moved familiarly ; he even knew the names of most of the colonels in command ; and he would squander sunny hours prone on the

lawn, heedless of challenge from bird or beast, poring over a tattered Army List. My own accomplishment was of another character—took, as it seemed to me, a wider and a more untrammelled range. Dragoons might have swaggered in Lincoln green, riflemen might have donned sporrans over tartan trews, without exciting notice or comment from me. But did you seek precise information as to the fauna of the American continent, then you had come to the right shop. Where and why the bison “wallowed”; how beaver were to be trapped and wild turkeys stalked; the grizzly and how to handle him, and the pretty pressing ways of the constrictor,—in fine, the haunts and the habits of all that burrowed, strutted, roared, or wriggled between the Atlantic and the Pacific,—all this knowledge I took for my province. By the others my equipment was fully recognized. Supposing a book with a bear-hunt in it made its way into the house, and the atmosphere was electric with excitement; still, it was necessary that I should first decide whether the slot had been properly described and properly followed up, ere the work could be stamped with full approval. A writer might have won fame throughout the civilized globe for his trappers and his realistic backwoods, and all went for nothing. If his pemmican were not properly compounded I damned his achievement, and it was heard no more of.

Harold was hardly old enough to possess a special subject of his own. He had his instincts, indeed, and at bird's-nesting they almost amounted to prophecy. Where we others only suspected eggs, surmised possible eggs, hinted doubtfully at eggs in the neighbourhood, Harold went straight for the right bush, bough, or hole as if he carried a divining-rod. But this faculty belonged to the class of mere gifts, and was not to be ranked with Edward's lore regarding facings, and mine as to the habits of prairie-dogs, both gained by painful study and extensive travel in those “realms of gold,” the Army List and Ballantyne.

Selina's subject, quite unaccountably, happened to be naval history. There is no laying down rules as to subjects ;

you just possess them—or rather, they possess you—and their genesis or protoplasm is rarely to be tracked down. Selina had never so much as seen the sea ; but for that matter neither had I ever set foot on the American continent, the by-ways of which I knew so intimately. And just as I, if set down without warning in the middle of the Rocky Mountains, would have been perfectly at home, so Selina, if a genie had dropped her suddenly on Portsmouth Hard, could have given points to most of its frequenters. From the days of Blake down to the death of Nelson (she never condescended further) Selina had taken spiritual part in every notable engagement of the British Navy ; and even in the dark days when she had to pick up skirts and flee, chased by an ungallant De Ruyter or Van Tromp, she was yet cheerful in the consciousness that ere long she would be gleefully hammering the fleets of the world, in the glorious times to follow. When that golden period arrived, Selina was busy indeed ; and, while loving best to stand where the splinters were flying the thickest, she was also a careful and critical student of seamanship and of manœuvre. She knew the order in which the great line-of-battle ships moved into action, the vessels they respectively engaged, the moment when each let go its anchor, and which of them had a spring on its cable (while not understanding the phrase, she carefully noted the fact) ; and she habitually went into an engagement on the quarter-deck of the gallant ship, that reserved its fire the longest.

At the time of Selina's weird seizure I was unfortunately away from home, on a loathsome visit to an aunt ; and my account is therefore feebly compounded from hearsay. It was an absence I never ceased to regret—scoring it up, with a sense of injury, against the aunt. There was a splendid uselessness about the whole performance that specially appealed to my artistic sense. That it should have been Selina, too, who should break out this way—Selina, who had just become a regular subscriber to the *Young Ladies' Journal*, and who allowed herself to be taken out to strange teas with an air of resignation palpably

assumed—this was a special joy, and served to remind me that much of this dreaded convention that was creeping over us might be, after all, only veneer. Edward also was absent, getting licked into shape at school ; but to him the loss was nothing. With his stern practical bent he wouldn't have seen any sense in it—to recall one of his favourite expressions. To Harold, however, for whom the gods had always cherished a special tenderness, it was granted, not only to witness, but also, priestlike, to feed the sacred fire itself. And if at the time he paid the penalty exacted by the sordid unimaginative ones who temporarily rule the roast, he must ever after, one feels sure, have carried inside him some of the white gladness of the acolyte who, greatly privileged, has been permitted to swing a censer at the sacrificing of the very Mass.

October was mellowing fast, and with it the year itself ; full of tender hints, in woodland and hedgerow, of a course well-nigh completed. From all sides that still afternoon you caught the quick breathing and sob of the runner nearing the goal. Preoccupied and possessed, Selina had strayed down the garden and out into the pasture beyond, where, on a bit of rising ground that dominated the garden on one side and the downs with the old coach-road on the other, she had cast herself down to chew the cud of fancy. There she was presently joined by Harold, breathless and very full of his latest grievance

"I asked him not to," he burst out. "I said if he'd only please wait a bit and Edward would be back soon, and it couldn't matter to *him*, and the pig wouldn't mind, and Edward'd be pleased and everybody'd be happy. But he just said he was very sorry, but bacon didn't wait for nobody. So I told him he was a regular beast, and then I came away. And—and I b'lieve they're doing it now !"

"Yes, he's a beast," agreed Selina, absently. She had forgotten all about the pig-killing. Harold kicked away a freshly thrown-up mole-hill, and prodded down the hole with a stick. From the direction of Farmer Larkin's demesne came a long-drawn note of sorrow, a thin cry and

appeal, telling that the stout soul of a black Berkshire pig was already faring down the stony track to Hades.

"D'you know what day it is?" said Selina presently, in a low voice, looking far away before her.

Harold did not appear to know, nor yet to care. He had laid open his mole-run for a yard or so, and was still grumbling at it absorbedly.

"It's Trafalgar Day," went on Selina, trancedly; "Trafalgar Day—and nobody cares!"

Something in her tone told Harold that he was not behaving quite becomingly. He didn't exactly know in what manner; still, he abandoned his mole-hunt for a more courteous attitude of attention.

"Over there," resumed Selina—she was gazing out in the direction of the old high road—"over there the coaches used to go by. Uncle Thomas was telling me about it the other day. And the people used to watch for 'em coming, to tell the time by, and p'r'aps to get their parcels. And one morning—they wouldn't be expecting anything different—one morning, first there would be a cloud of dust, as usual, and then the coach would come racing by, and *then* they would know! For the coach would be dressed in laurel, all laurel from stem to stern! And the coachman would be wearing laurel, and the guard would be wearing laurel; and then they would know, then they would know!"

Harold listened in respectful silence. He would much rather have been hunting the mole, who must have been a mile away by this time if he had his wits about him. But he had all the natural instincts of a gentleman; of whom it is one of the principal marks, if not the complete definition, never to show signs of being bored.

Selina rose to her feet, and paced the turf restlessly with a short quarter-deck walk.

"Why can't we *do* something?" she burst out presently. "*He*—he did everything—why can't we do anything for him?"

"*Who* did everything?" inquired Harold, meekly.



## 84 THE TWENTY-FIRST OF OCTOBER

It was useless wasting further longings on that mole. Like the dead, he travelled fast.

"Why, Nelson, of course," said Selina, shortly, still looking restlessly around for help or suggestion.

"But he's—he's *dead*, isn't he?" asked Harold, slightly puzzled.

"What's that got to do with it?" retorted his sister, resuming her caged-lion promenade.

Harold was somewhat taken aback. In the case of the pig, for instance, whose last outcry had now passed into stillness, he had considered the chapter as finally closed. Whatever innocent mirth the holidays might hold in store for Edward, that particular pig, at least, would not be a contributor. And now he was given to understand that the situation had not materially changed! He would have to revise his ideas, it seemed. Sitting up on end, he looked towards the garden for assistance in the task. Thence, even as he gazed, a tiny column of smoke rose straight up into the still air. The gardener had been sweeping that afternoon, and now, an unconscious priest, was offering his sacrilege of autumn leaves to the calm-eyed goddess of changing hues and chill forebodings who was moving slowly about the land that golden afternoon. Harold was up and off in a moment, forgetting Nelson, forgetting the pig, the mole, the Larkin betrayal, and Selina's strange fever of conscience. Here was fire, real fire, to play with, and that was even better than messing with water, or remodelling the plastic surface of the earth. Of all the toys the world provides for right-minded persons, the original elements rank easily the first.

But Selina sat on where she was, her chin on her fists; and her fancies whirled and drifted, here and there, in curls and eddies, along with the smoke she was watching. As the quick-footed dusk of the short October day stepped lightly over the garden, little red tongues of fire might be seen to leap and vanish in the smoke. Harold, anon staggering under armfuls of leaves, anon stoking vigorously, was discernible only at fitful intervals. It was another sort

of smoke that the inner eye of Selina was looking upon,—a smoke that hung in sullen banks round the masts and the hulls of the fighting ships ; a smoke from beneath which came thunder and the crash and the splinter-rip, the shout of the boarding-party, the choking sob of the gunner stretched by his gun ; a smoke from out of which at last she saw, as through a riven pall, the radiant spirit of the Victor, crowned with the coronal of a perfect death, leap in full assurance up into the ether that Immortals breathe. The dusk was glooming towards darkness when she rose and moved slowly down towards the beckoning fire ; something of the priestess in her stride, something of the devotee in the set purpose of her eye.

The leaves were well alight by this time, and Harold had just added an old furze bush, which flamed and crackled stirringly.

“ Go 'n' get some more sticks,” ordered Selina, “ and shavings, 'n' chunks of wood, 'n' anything you can find. Look here—in the kitchen-garden there's a pile of old pea-sticks. Fetch as many as you can carry, and then go back and bring some more ! ”

“ But I say——” began Harold, amazedly, scarce knowing his sister, and with a vision of a frenzied gardener, pea-stickless and threatening retribution.

“ Go and fetch 'em quick ! ” shouted Selina, stamping with impatience

Harold ran off at once, true to the stern system of discipline in which he had been nurtured. But his eyes were like round O's, and as he ran he talked fast to himself, in evident disorder of mind.

The pea-sticks made a rare blaze, and the fire, no longer smouldering sullenly, leapt up and began to assume the appearance of a genuine bonfire. Harold, awed into silence at first, began to jump round it with shouts of triumph. Selina looked on grimly, with knitted brow ; she was not yet fully satisfied. “ Can't you get any more sticks ? ” she said presently. “ Go and hunt about. Get some old hampers and matting and things out of the tool-house.

Smash up that old cucumber frame Edward shoved you into, the day we were playing scouts and Mohicans. Stop a bit! Hooray! I know. You come along with me."

Hard by there was a hot-house, Aunt Eliza's special pride and joy, and even grimly approved of by the gardener. At one end, in an out-house adjoining, the necessary firing was stored; and to this sacred fuel, of which we were strictly forbidden to touch a stick, Selina went straight. Harold followed obediently, prepared for any crime after that of the pea-sticks, but pinching himself to see if he were really awake.

"You bring some coals," said Selina, briefly, without any palaver or pro-and-con discussion. "Here's a basket. I'll manage the faggots!"

In a very few minutes there was little doubt about its being a genuine bonfire and no paltry makeshift. Selina, a Mænad now, hatless and tossing disordered locks, all the dross of the young lady purged out of her, stalked around the pyre of her own purloining, or prodded it with a pea-stick. And as she prodded she murmured at intervals, "I *knew* there was something we could do! It isn't much—but still it's *something*!"

The gardener had gone home to his tea. Aunt Eliza had driven out for hers a long way off, and was not expected back till quite late, and this far end of the garden was not overlooked by any windows. So the Tribute blazed on merrily unchecked. Villagers far away, catching sight of the flare, muttered something about "them young devils at their tricks again," and trudged on beer-wards. Never a thought of what day it was, never a thought for Nelson, who preserved their honest pint-pots, to be paid for in honest pence, and saved them from *litres* and decimal coinage. Nearer at hand, frightened rabbits popped up and vanished with a flick of white tails; scared birds fluttered among the branches, or sped across the glade to quieter sleeping-quarters; but never a bird nor a beast gave a thought to the hero to whom they owed it that each year

their little homes of horsehair, wool, or moss, were safe established 'neath the flap of the British flag ; and that Game Laws, quietly permanent, made *la chasse* a terror only to their betters. No one seemed to know, nor to care, nor to sympathize. In all the ecstasy of her burnt-offering and sacrifice, Selina stood alone

And yet—not quite alone ! For, as the fire was roaring at its best, certain stars stepped delicately forth on the surface of the immensity above, and peered down doubtfully—with wonder at first, then with interest, then with recognition, with a start of glad surprise *They* at least knew all about it, *they* understood. Among *them* the Name was a daily familiar word ; his story was a part of the music to which they swung, himself was their fellow and their mate and comrade So they peeped, and winked, and peeped again, and called to their laggard brothers to come quick and sec.

“ The best of life is but intoxication ” ; and Selina, who during her brief inebriation had lived in an ecstasy as golden as our drab existence affords, had to experience the inevitable bitterness of awakening sobriety, when the dying down of the flames into sullen embers coincided with the frenzied entrance of Aunt Eliza on the scene. It was not so much that she was at once and for ever disgraced, broke, sent before the mast, and branded as one on whom no reliance could be placed, even with Edward safe at school, and myself under the distant vigilance of an aunt ; that her pocket-money was stopped indefinitely, and her new Church Service, the pride of her last birthday, removed from her own custody and placed under the control of a Trust. She sorrowed rather because she had dragged poor Harold, against his better judgment, into a most horrible scrape, and moreover because, when the reaction had fairly set in, when the exaltation had fizzled away and the young-lady portion of her had crept timorously back to its wonted lodging, she could only see herself as a plain fool,

## 88 THE TWENTY-FIRST OF OCTOBER

unjustified, undeniable, without a shadow of an excuse or explanation.

As for Harold, youth and a short memory made his case less pitiful than it seemed to his more sensitive sister. True, he started upstairs to his lonely cot bellowing dismally, before him a dreary future of pains and penalties, sufficient to last to the crack of doom. Outside his door, however, he tumbled over Augustus the cat, and made capture of him ; and at once his mourning was changed into a song of triumph, as he conveyed his prize into port. For Augustus, who detested above all things going to bed with little boys, was ever more knave than fool, and the trapper who was wily enough to ensnare him had achieved something notable. Augustus, when he realized that his fate was sealed, and his night's lodging settled, wisely made the best of things, and listened, with a languorous air of complete comprehension, to the incoherent babble concerning pigs and heroes, moles and bonfires, which served Harold for a self-sung lullaby. Yet it may be doubted whether Augustus was one of those rare fellows who thoroughly understood.

But Selina knew no more of this source of consolation than of the sympathy with which the stars were winking above her ; and it was only after some sad interval of time, and on a very moist pillow, that she drifted into that quaint inconsequent country where you may meet your own pet hero strolling down the road, and commit what hare-brained oddities you like, and everybody understands and appreciates.

## DIES IRÆ

**T**HOSE memorable days that move in procession, their heads just out of the mist of years long dead—the most of them are full-eyed as the dandelion that from dawn to shade has steeped itself in sunlight. Here and there in their ranks, however, moves a forlorn one who is blind—blind in the sense of the dulled window-pane on which the pelting raindrops have mingled and run down, obscuring sunshine and the circling birds, happy fields, and storied garden ; blind with the spatter of a misery uncomprehended, unanalysed, only felt as something corporeal in its buffeting effects.

Martha began it ; and yet Martha was not really to blame. Indeed, that was half the trouble of it—no solid person stood full in view, to be blamed and to make atonement. There was only a wretched, impalpable condition to deal with. Breakfast was just over ; the sun was summoning us, imperious as a herald with clamour of trumpet ; I ran upstairs to her with a broken bootlace in my hand, and there she was, crying in a corner, her head in her apron. Nothing could be got from her but the same dismal succession of sobs that would not have done, that struck and hurt like a physical beating ; and meanwhile the sun was getting impatient, and I wanted my bootlace.

Inquiry below stairs revealed the cause. Martha's brother was dead, it seemed—her sailor brother Billy ; drowned in one of those strange far-off seas it was our dream to navigate one day. We had known Billy well, and appreciated him. When an approaching visit of Billy to his sister had been announced, we had counted the days to it. When his cheery voice was at last heard in the kitchen and we had descended with shouts, first of all he had to

exhibit his tattooed arms, always a subject for fresh delight and envy and awe ; then he was called upon for tricks, jugglings, and strange, fearful gymnastics ; and lastly came yarns, and more yarns, and yarns till bedtime. There had never been any one like Billy in his own particular sphere ; and now he was drowned, they said, and Martha was miserable, and—and I couldn't get a new bootlace. They told me that Billy would never come back any more, and I stared out of the window at the sun which came back, right enough, every day, and their news conveyed nothing whatever to me. Martha's sorrow hit home a little, but only because the actual sight and sound of it gave me a dull, bad sort of pain low down inside—a pain not to be actually located. Moreover, I was still wanting my bootlace

This was a poor sort of a beginning to a day that, so far as outside conditions went, had promised so well. I rigged up a sort of jury-mast of a bootlace with a bit of old string, and wandered off to look up the girls, conscious of a jar and a discordance in the scheme of things. The moment I entered the schoolroom something in the air seemed to tell me that here, too, matters were strained and awry. Selina was staring listlessly out of the window, one foot curled round her leg. When I spoke to her she jerked a shoulder testily, but did not condescend to the civility of a reply. Charlotte, absolutely unoccupied, sprawled in a chair, and there were signs of sniffles about her, even at that early hour. It was but a trifling matter that had caused all this electricity in the atmosphere, and the girls' manner of taking it seemed to me most unreasonable. Within the last few days the time had come round for the dispatch of a hamper to Edward at school. Only one hamper a term was permitted him, so its preparation was a sort of blend of revelry and religious ceremony. After the main corpus of the thing had been carefully selected and safely bestowed—the pots of jam, the cake, the sausages, and the apples that filled up corners so nicely—after the last package had been wedged in, the girls had deposited their own

private and personal offerings on the top. I forget their precise nature ; anyhow, they were nothing of any particular practical use to a boy. But they had involved some contrivance and labour, some skimping of pocket-money, and much delightful cloud-building as to the effect on their enraptured recipient. Well, yesterday there had come a terse acknowledgment from Edward, heartily commending the cakes and the jam, stamping the sausages with the seal of Smith major's approval, and finally hinting that, fortified as he now was, nothing more was necessary but a remittance of five shillings in postage stamps to enable him to face the world armed against every buffet of fate. That was all. Never a word or a hint of the personal tributes or of his appreciation of them. To us—to Harold and me, that is—the letter seemed natural and sensible enough. After all, provender was the main thing, and five shillings stood for a complete equipment against the most unexpected turns of luck. The presents were very well in their way—very nice, and so on—but life was a serious matter, and the contest called for cakes and half-crowns to carry it on, not gewgaws and knitted mittens and the like. The girls, however, in their obstinate way, persisted in taking their own view of the slight. Hence it was that I received my second rebuff of the morning.

Somewhat disheartened, I made my way downstairs and out into the sunlight, where I found Harold playing conspirators by himself on the gravel. He had dug a small hole in the walk and had laid an imaginary train of powder thereto and, as he sought refuge in the laurels from the inevitable explosion, I heard him murmur : “ ‘ My God ! ’ said the Czar, ‘ my plans are frustrated ! ’ ” It seemed an excellent occasion for being a black puma. Harold liked black pumas, on the whole, as well as any animal we were familiar with. So I launched myself on him, with the appropriate howl, rolling him over on the gravel.

Life may be said to be composed of things that come off and things that don't come off. This thing, unfortunately, was one of the things that didn't come off. From beneath



me I heard a shrill cry of, " Oh, it's my sore knee ! " And Harold wriggled himself free from the puma's clutches, bellowing dismally. Now, I honestly didn't know he had a sore knee, and, what's more, he knew I didn't know he had a sore knee. According to boy-ethics, therefore, his attitude was wrong, sore knee or not, and no apology was due from me. I made half-way advances, however, suggesting we should lie in ambush by the edge of the pond and cut off the ducks as they waddled down in simple, unsuspecting single file ; then hunt them as bisons flying scattered over the vast prairie. A fascinating pursuit this, and strictly illicit. But Harold would none of my overtures, and retreated to the house wailing with full lungs.

Things were getting simply infernal. I struck out blindly for the open country ; and even as I made for the gate a shrill voice from a window bade me keep off the flower-beds. When the gate had swung to behind me with a vicious click I felt better, and after ten minutes along the road it began to grow on me that some radical change was needed, that I was in a blind alley, and that this intolerable state of things must somehow cease. All that I could do I had already done. As well-meaning a fellow as ever stepped was pounding along the road that day, with an exceeding sore heart ; one who only wished to live and let live, in touch with his fellows, and appreciating what joys life had to offer. What was wanted now was a complete change of environment. Somewhere in the world, I felt sure, justice and sympathy still resided. There were places called pampas, for instance, that sounded well. League upon league of grass, with just an occasional wild horse, and not a relation within the horizon ! To a bruised spirit this seemed a sane and a healing sort of existence. There were other pleasant corners, again, where you dived for pearls and stabbed sharks in the stomach with your big knife. No relations would be likely to come interfering with you when thus blissfully occupied. And yet I did not wish—just yet—to have done with relations entirely. They should be made to feel their position first, to see themselves as they really

were, and to wish—when it was too late—that they had behaved more properly.

Of all professions, the army seemed to lend itself the most thoroughly to the scheme. You enlisted, you followed the drum, you marched, fought, and ported arms, under strange skies, through unrecorded years. At last, at long last, your opportunity would come, when the horrors of war were flickering through the quiet country-side where you were cradled and bred, but where the memory of you had long been dim. Folk would run together clamorous, palsied with fear; and among the terror-stricken groups would figure certain aunts. "What hope is left us?" they would ask themselves, "save in the clemency of the General, the mysterious, invincible General, of whom men tell such romantic tales?" And the army would march in, and the guns would rattle and leap along the village street, and, last of all, you—you, the General, the fabled hero—you would enter, on your coal-black charger, your pale set face seamed by an interesting sabre-cut. And then—but every boy has rehearsed this familiar piece a score of times. You are magnanimous, in fine—that goes without saying; you have a coal-black horse, and a sabre-cut, and you can afford to be very magnanimous. But all the same you give them a good talking-to.

This pleasant conceit simply ravished my soul for some twenty minutes, and then the old sense of injury began to well up afresh, and to call for new plasters and soothing syrups. This time I took refuge in happy thoughts of the sea. The sea was my real sphere, after all. On the sea, in especial, you could combine distinction with lawlessness, whereas the army seemed to be always weighted by a certain plodding submission to discipline. To be sure by all accounts the life was at first a rough one. But just then I wanted to suffer keenly; I wanted to be a poor devil of a cabin boy, kicked, beaten, and sworn at—for a time. Perhaps some hint, some inkling of my sufferings might reach their ears. In due course the sloop or felucca would turn up—it always did—the rakish-looking craft, black of hull,

low in the water, and bristling with guns ; the Jolly Roger flapping overhead, and myself for sole commander. By and by, as usually happened, an East Indiaman would come sailing along full of relations—not a necessary relation would be missing. And the crew should walk the plank, and the captain should dance from his own yard-arm, and then I would take the passengers in hand—that miserable group of well-known figures cowering on the quarter-deck !—and then—and then the same old performance : the air thick with magnanimity. In all the repertory of heroes, none is more truly magnanimous than your pirate chief.

When at last I brought myself back from the future to the actual present, I found that these delectable visions had helped me over a longer stretch of road than I had imagined ; and I looked around and took my bearings. To the right of me was a long low building of grey stone, new, and yet not smugly so ; new, and yet possessing distinction, marked with a character that did not depend on lichen or on crumbling semi-effacement of moulding and mullion. Strangers might have been puzzled to classify it ; to me, an explorer from earliest years, the place was familiar enough. Most folk called it “ The Settlement ” ; others, with quite sufficient conciseness for our neighbourhood, spoke of “ them there fellows up by Halliday’s ” ; others again, with a hint of derision, named them the “ monks.” This last title I supposed to be intended for satire, and knew to be fatuously wrong. I was thoroughly acquainted with monks—in books—and well knew the cut of their long frocks, their shaven polls, and their fascinating big dogs, with brandy-bottles round their necks, incessantly hauling happy travellers out of the snow. The only dog at the settlement was an Irish terrier, and the good fellows who owned him, and were owned by him, in common, wore clothes of the most nondescript order, and mostly cultivated side-whiskers. I had wandered up there one day, searching (as usual) for something I never found, and had been taken in by them and treated as friend and comrade. They had made me free of their ideal little

rooms, full of books and pictures, and clean of the anti-macassar taint ; they had shown me their chapel, high, hushed, and faintly scented, beautiful with a strange new beauty born both of what it had and what it had not—that too familiar dowdiness of common places of worship. They had also fed me in their dining-hall, where a long table stood on trestles plain to view, and all the woodwork was natural, unpainted, healthily scrubbed, and redolent of the forest it came from. I brought away from that visit, and kept by me for many days, a sense of cleanness, of the freshness that pricks the senses—the freshness of cool spring water ; and the large swept spaces of the rooms, the red tiles, and the oaken settles suggested a comfort that had no connexion with padded upholstery

On this particular morning I was in much too unsociable a mind for paying friendly calls. Still, something in the aspect of the place harmonized with my humour, and I worked my way round to the back, where the ground, after affording level enough for a kitchen-garden, broke steeply away. Both the word *Gothic* and the thing itself were still unknown to me ; yet doubtless the architecture of the place, consistent throughout, accounted for its sense of comradeship in my hour of disheartenment. As I mused there, with the low, grey, purposeful-looking building before me, and thought of my pleasant friends within, and what good times they always seemed to be having, and how they larked with the Irish terrier, whose footing was one of a perfect equality, I thought of a certain look in their faces, as if they had a common purpose and a business, and were acting under orders thoroughly recognized and understood. I remembered, too, something that Martha had told me, about these same fellows doing “ a power o’ good,” and other hints I had collected vaguely, of renuncements, rules, self-denials, and the like. Thereupon, out of the depths of my morbid soul swam up a new and fascinating idea ; and at once the career of arms seemed over-acted and stale, and piracy, as a profession, flat and unprofitable. This, then, or something like it, should be my

vocation and my revenge. A severer line of business, perhaps, such as I had read of; something that included black bread and a hair-shirt. There should be vows, too—irrevocable, blood-curdling vows; and an iron grating. This iron grating was the most necessary feature of all, for I intended that on the other side of it my relations should range themselves—I mentally ran over the catalogue, and saw that the whole gang was present, all in their proper places—a sad-eyed row, combined in tristful appeal. “We see our error now,” they would say; “we were always dull dogs, slow to catch—especially in those akin to us—the finer qualities of soul! We misunderstood you, misappreciated you, and we own up to it. And now——” “Alas, my dear friends,” I would strike in here, waving towards them an ascetic hand—one of the emaciated sort, that lets the light shine through at the finger-tips—“Alas, you come too late! This conduct is fitting and meritorious on your part, and indeed I always expected it of you, sooner or later; but the die is cast, and you may go home again and bewail at your leisure this too tardy repentance of yours. For me, I am vowed and dedicated, and my relations henceforth are austerity and holy works. Once a month, should you wish it, it shall be your privilege to come and gaze at me through this very solid grating; but——” *Whack!*

A well-aimed clod of garden soil, whizzing just past my ear, starred on a tree-trunk behind, spattering me with dirt. The present came back to me in a flash, and I numbly took cover behind the trees, realizing that the enemy was up and abroad, with ambuscades, alarms, and thrilling sallies. It was the gardener's boy, I knew well enough; a red proletariat, who hated me just because I was a gentleman. Hastily picking up a nice sticky clod in one hand, with the other I delicately projected my hat beyond the shelter of the tree-trunk. I had not fought with Redskins all these years for nothing

As I had expected, another clod, of the first class for size and stickiness, took my poor hat full in the centre. Then,

Ajax-like, shouting terribly, I issued from shelter and discharged my ammunition. Woe then for the gardener's boy, who, unprepared, skipping in premature triumph, took the clod full in his stomach ! He, the foolish one, witless on whose side the gods were fighting that day, discharged yet other missiles, wavering and wide of the mark ; for his wind had been taken with the first clod, and he shot wildly, as one already desperate and in flight. I got another clod in at short range ; we clinched on the brow of the hill, and rolled down to the bottom together. When he had shaken himself free and regained his legs, he trotted smartly off in the direction of his mother's cottage ; but over his shoulder he discharged at me both imprecation and deprecation, menace mixed up with an under-current of tears.

But as for me, I made off smartly for the road, my frame tingling, my head high, with never a backward look at the Settlement of suggestive aspect, or at my well-planned future which lay in fragments around it. Life had its jollities, then ; life was action, contest, victory ! The present was rosy once more, surprises lurked on every side, and I was beginning to feel villainously hungry.

Just as I gained the road a cart came rattling by, and I rushed for it, caught the chain that hung below, and swung thrillingly between the dizzy wheels, choked and blinded with delicious-smelling dust, the world slipping by me like a streaky ribbon below, till the driver licked at me with his whip, and I had to descend to earth again. Abandoning the beaten track, I then struck homewards through the fields ; not that the way was very much shorter, but rather because on that route one avoided the bridge, and had to splash through the stream and get refreshingly wet. Bridges were made for narrow folk, for people with aims and vocations which compelled abandonment of many of life's highest pleasures. Truly wise men called on each element alike to minister to their joy, and while the touch of sun-bathed air, the fragrance of garden soil, the ductible qualities of mud, and the spark-whirling rapture

of playing with fire, had each their special charm, they did not overlook the bliss of getting their feet wet. As I came forth on the common Harold broke out of an adjoining copse and ran to meet me, the morning rain-clouds all blown away from his face. He had made a new squirrel-stick, it seemed. Made it all himself; melted the lead and everything! I examined the instrument critically, and pronounced it absolutely magnificent. As we passed in at our gate the girls were distantly visible, gardening with a zeal in cheerful contrast to their heartsick lassitude of the morning. "There's bin another letter come to-day," Harold explained, "and the hamper got joggled about on the journey, and the presents worked down into the straw and all over the place. One of 'em turned up inside the cold duck. And that's why they weren't found at first. And Edward said, Thanks *awfully*!"

I did not see Martha again until we were all reassembled at tea-time, when she seemed red-eyed and strangely silent, neither scolding nor finding fault with anything. Instead, she was very kind and thoughtful with jams and things, feverishly pressing unwonted delicacies on us, who wanted little pressing enough. Then suddenly, when I was busiest, she disappeared; and Charlotte whispered to me presently that she had heard her go to her room and lock herself in. This struck me as a funny sort of proceeding.

## THE MAGIC RING

GROWN-UP people really ought to be more careful. Among themselves it may seem but a small thing to give their word and take back their word. For them there are so many compensations. Life lies at their feet, a parti-coloured india-rubber ball ; they may kick it this way or kick it that, it turns up blue, yellow or green, but always coloured and glistening. Thus, one sees it happen almost every day, and, with a jest and a laugh, the thing is over, and the disappointed one turns to fresh pleasure, lying ready to his hand. But with those who are below them, whose little globe is swayed by them, who rush to build star-pointing alhambras on their most casual word, they really ought to be more careful.

In this case of the circus, for instance, it was not as if we had led up to the subject. It was they who began it entirely—prompted thereto by the local newspaper. “What, a circus !” said they in their irritating, casual way : “that would be nice to take the children to. Wednesday would be a good day. Suppose we go on Wednesday. Oh, and pleats are being worn again, with rows of deep braid,” etc.

What the others thought I know not ; what they said, if they said anything, I did not comprehend. For me the house was bursting, walls seemed to cramp and to stifle, the roof was jumping and lifting. Escape was the imperative thing—to escape into the open air, to shake off bricks and mortar, and to wander in the unfrequented places of the earth, the more properly to take in the passion and the promise of the giddy situation.

Nature seemed prim and staid that day, and the globe gave no hint that it was flying round a circus ring of its own. Could they really be true, I wondered, all those



bewildering things I had heard tell of circuses? Did long-tailed ponies really walk on their hind-legs and fire off pistols? Was it humanly possible for clowns to perform one-half of the bewitching drolleries recorded in history? And how, oh, how dare I venture to believe that, from off the backs of creamy Arab steeds, ladies of more than earthly beauty discharged themselves through paper hoops? No, it was not altogether possible, there must have been some exaggeration. Still, I would be content with very little, I would take a low percentage—a very small proportion of the circus myth would more than satisfy me. But again, even supposing that history were, once in a way, no liar, could it be that I myself was really fated to look upon this thing in the flesh and to live through it, to survive the rapture? No, it was altogether too much. Something was bound to happen, one of us would develop measles, the world would blow up with a loud explosion. I must not dare, I must not presume, to entertain the smallest hope. I must endeavour sternly to think of something else.

Needless to say, I thought, I dreamed of nothing else, day or night. Waking, I walked arm-in-arm with a clown, and cracked a portentous whip to the brave music of a band. Sleeping, I pursued—perched astride of a coal-black horse—a princess all gauze and spangles, who always managed to keep just one unattainable length ahead. In the early morning Harold and I, once fully awake, cross-examined each other as to the possibilities of this or that circus tradition, and exhausted the lore long ere the first housemaid was stirring. In this state of exaltation we slipped onward to what promised to be a day of all white days—which brings me right back to my text, that grown-up people really ought to be more careful.

I had known it could never really be; I had said so to myself a dozen times. The vision was too sweetly ethereal for embodiment. Yet the pang of the disillusionment was none the less keen and sickening, and the pain was as that of a corporeal wound. It seemed strange and foreboding,

when we entered the breakfast-room, not to find everybody cracking whips, jumping over chairs, and whooping in ecstatic rehearsal of the wild reality to come. The situation became grim and pallid indeed when I caught the expressions "garden-party" and "my mauve tulle," and realized that they both referred to that very afternoon. And every minute, as I sat silent and listened, my heart sank lower and lower, descending relentlessly like a clock-weight into my boot soles

Throughout my agony I never dreamed of resorting to a direct question, much less a reproach. Even during the period of joyful anticipation some fear of breaking the spell had kept me from any bald circus talk in the presence of them. But Harold, who was built in quite another way, so soon as he discerned the drift of their conversation and heard the knell of all his hopes, filled the room with wail and clamour of bereavement. The grinning welkin rang with "Circus!" "Circus!" shook the window-panes; the mocking walls re-echoed "Circus!" Circus he would have, and the whole circus, and nothing but the circus. No compromise for him, no evasions, no fallacious, unsecured promises to pay. He had drawn his cheque on the Bank of Expectation, and it had got to be cashed then and there; else he would yell, and yell himself into a fit, and come out of it and yell again. Yelling should be his profession, his art, his mission, his career. He was qualified, he was resolute, and he was in no hurry to retire from the business.

The noisy ones of the world, if they do not always shout themselves into the imperial purple, are sure at least of receiving attention. If they cannot sell everything at their own price, one thing—silence—must, at any cost, be purchased of them. Harold accordingly had to be consoled by the employment of every specious fallacy and base-born trick known to those whose doom it is to handle children. For me their hollow cajolery had no interest, I could pluck no consolation out of their bankrupt though prodigal pledges. I only waited till that hateful, well-known

"Some other time, dear!" told me that hope was finally dead. Then I left the room without any remark. It made it worse—if anything could—to hear that stale, worn-out old phrase, still supposed by those dullards to have some efficacy.

To nature, as usual, I drifted by instinct, and there, out of the track of humanity, under a friendly hedge-row had my black hour unseen. The world was a globe no longer, space was no more filled with whirling circuses of spheres. That day the old beliefs rose up and asserted themselves, and the earth was flat again—ditch-riddled, stagnant, and deadly flat. The undeviating roads crawled straight and white, elms dressed themselves stiffly along inflexible hedges, all nature, centrifugal no longer, sprawled flatly in lines out to its farthest edge, and I felt just like walking out to that terminus, and dropping quietly off. Then, as I sat there, morosely chewing bits of stick, the recollection came back to me of certain fascinating advertisements I had spelled out in the papers—advertisements of great and happy men, owning big ships of tonnage running into four figures, who yet craved, to the extent of public supplication, for the sympathetic co-operation of youths as apprentices. I did not rightly know what apprentices might be, nor whether I was yet big enough to be styled a youth; but one thing seemed clear, that, by some such means as this, whatever the intervening hardships, I could eventually visit all the circuses of the world—the circuses of merry France and gaudy Spain, of Holland and Bohemia, of China and Peru. Here was a plan worth thinking out in all its bearings; for something had presently to be done to end this intolerable state of things.

Midday, and even feeding-time, passed by gloomily enough, till a small disturbance occurred which had the effect of releasing some of the electricity with which the air was charged. Harold, it should be explained, was of a very different mental mould, and never brooded, moped, nor ate his heart out over any disappointment. One wild outburst—one dissolution of a minute into his original

elements of air and water, and tears and outcry—so much insulted nature claimed. Then he would pull himself together, iron out his countenance with a smile, and adjust himself to the new condition of things.

If the gods are ever grateful to man for anything, it is when he is so good as to display a short memory. The Olympians were never slow to recognize this quality of Harold's, in which, indeed, their salvation lay, and on this occasion their gratitude had taken the practical form of a fine fat orange, tough-rinded as oranges of those days were wont to be. This he had eviscerated in the good old-fashioned manner, by biting out a hole in the shoulder, inserting a lump of sugar therein, and then working it cannily till the whole soul and body of the orange passed glorified through the sugar into his being. Thereupon, filled full of orange-juice and iniquity, he conceived a deadly snare. Having deftly patted and squeezed the orange-skin till it resumed its original shape, he filled it up with water, inserted a fresh lump of sugar in the orifice, and, issuing forth, blandly proffered it to me as I sat moodily in the doorway dreaming of strange wild circuses under tropic skies.

Such a stale old dodge as this would hardly have taken me in at ordinary moments. But Harold had reckoned rightly upon the disturbing effect of ill-humour, and had guessed, perhaps, that I thirsted for comfort and consolation, and would not criticize too closely the source from which they came. Unthinkingly I grasped the golden fraud which collapsed at my touch, and squirted its contents into my eyes and over my collar, till the nethermost parts of me were damp with the water that had run down my neck. In an instant I had Harold down, and, with all the energy of which I was capable, devoted myself to grinding his head into the gravel ; while he, realizing that the closure was applied, and that the time for discussion or argument was past, sternly concentrated his powers on kicking me in the stomach.

Some people can never allow events to work themselves

out quietly. At this juncture one of Them swooped down on the scene, pouring shrill, misplaced abuse on both of us : on me for ill-treating my younger brother, whereas it was distinctly I who was the injured and the deceived ; on him for the high offence of assault and battery on a clean collar—a collar which I had myself deflowered and defaced, shortly before, in sheer desperate ill-temper. Disgusted and defiant we fled in different directions, rejoining each other later in the kitchen-garden ; and as we strolled along together, our short feud forgotten, Harold observed, gloomily : “ I should like to be a cave-man, like Uncle George was tellin’ us about : with a flint hatchet and no clothes, and live in a cave and not know anybody ! ”

“ And if any one came to see us we didn’t like,” I joined in, catching on to the points of the idea, “ we’d hit him on the head with the hatchet till he dropped down dead.”

“ And then,” said Harold, warming up, “ we’d drag him into the cave and *skin him* ! ”

For a space we gloated silently over the fair scene our imaginations had conjured up. It was *blood* we felt the need of just then. We wanted no luxuries, nothing dear-bought nor far-fetched. Just plain blood, and nothing else, and plenty of it

Blood, however, was not to be had. The time was out of joint, and we had been born too late. So we went off to the greenhouse, crawled into the heating arrangement underneath, and played at the dark and dirty and unrestricted life of cave-men till we were heartily sick of it. Then we emerged once more into historic times, and went off to the road to look for something living and sentient to throw stones at.

Nature, so often a cheerful ally, sometimes sulks and refuses to play. When in this mood she passes the word to her underlings, and all the little people of fur and feather take the hint and slip home quietly by back streets. In vain we scouted, lurked, crept, and ambuscaded. Everything that usually scurried, hopped, or fluttered—the small society of the undergrowth—seemed to have

engagements elsewhere. The horrid thought that perhaps they had all gone off to the circus occurred to us simultaneously, and we humped ourselves up on the fence and felt bad. Even the sound of approaching wheels failed to stir any interest in us. When you are bent on throwing stones at something, humanity seems obtrusive and better away. Then suddenly we both jumped off the fence together, our faces clearing. For our educated ear had told us that the approaching rattle could only proceed from a dog-cart, and we felt sure it must be the funny man.

We called him the funny man because he was sad and serious, and said little, but gazed right into our souls, and made us tell him just what was on our minds at the time, and then came out with some magnificently luminous suggestion that cleared every cloud away. What was more, he would then go off with us at once and play the thing right out to its finish, earnestly and devotedly, putting all other things aside. So we called him the funny man, meaning only that he was different from those others who thought it incumbent on them to play the painful mummer. The ideal as opposed to the real man was what we meant, only we were not acquainted with the phrase. Those others, with their laboured jests and clumsy contortions, doubtless flattered themselves, that *they* were funny men; we, who had to sit through and applaud the painful performance, knew better.

He pulled up to a walk as soon as he caught sight of us, and the dog-cart crawled slowly along till it stopped just opposite. Then he leant his chin on his hand and regarded us long and soulfully, yet said he never a word; while we jiggled up and down in the dust, grinning bashfully but with expectation. For you never knew exactly what this man might say or do.

"You look bored," he remarked presently; "thoroughly bored. Or else—let me see; you're not married, are you?"

He asked this in such sad earnestness that we hastened to assure him we were not married, though we felt he

ought to have known that much ; we had been intimate for some time.

"Then it's only boredom," he said. "Just satiety and world-weariness. Well, if you assure me you aren't married you can climb into this cart and I'll take you for a drive. I'm bored, too. I want to do something dark and dreadful and exciting."

We clambered in, of course, yapping with delight and treading all over his toes ; and as we set off, Harold demanded of him imperiously whither he was going.

"My wife," he replied, "has ordered me to go and look up the curate and bring him home to tea. Does that sound sufficiently exciting for you ?"

Our faces fell. The curate of the hour was not a success, from our point of view. He was not a funny man, in any sense of the word.

"—but I'm not going to," he added cheerfully. "Then I was to stop at some cottage and ask—what was it ? There was *nettle-rash* mixed up in it, I'm sure. But never mind, I've forgotten, and it doesn't matter. Look here, we're three desperate young fellows who stick at nothing. Suppose we go off to the circus ?"

Of certain supreme moments it is not easy to write. The varying shades and currents of emotion may indeed be put into words by those specially skilled that way ; they often are, at considerable length. But the sheer, crude article itself—the strong, live thing that leaps up inside you and swells and strangles you, the dizziness of revulsion that takes the breath like cold water—who shall depict this and live ? All I knew was that I would have died then and there, cheerfully, for the funny man ; that I longed for Red Indians to spring out from the hedge on the dog-cart, just to show what I would do ; and that, with all this, I could not find the least little word to say to him.

Harold was less taciturn. With shrill voice, uplifted in solemn chant, he sang the great spherul circus-song and the undying glory of the Ring. Of its timeless beginning he sang, of its fashioning by cosmic forces, and of its harmony

with the stellar plan. Of horses he sang, of their strength, their swiftness, and their docility as to tricks. Of clowns again, of glory, of knavery, and of the eternal type that shall endure. Lastly he sang of Her—the Woman of the Ring—flawless, complete, untrammelled in each subtly curving limb; earth's highest output, Time's noblest expression. At least, he doubtless sang all these things and more—he certainly seemed to; though all that was distinguishable was, "We're-goin'-to-the-circus!" and then once more, "We're-goin'-to-the-circus!"—the sweet rhythmic phrase repeated again and again. But indeed I cannot be quite sure, for I heard confusedly, as in a dream. Wings of fire sprang from the old mare's shoulders. We whirled on our way through purple clouds, and earth and the rattle of wheels were far away below.

The dream and the dizziness were still in my head when I found myself, scarce conscious of intermediate steps, seated actually in the circus at last, and took in the first sniff of that intoxicating circus smell that will stay by me while this clay endures. The place was beset by a hum and a glitter and a mist; suspense brooded large o'er the blank, mysterious arena. Strung up to the highest pitch of expectation, we knew not from what quarter, in what divine shape, the first surprise would come.

A thud of unseen hoofs first set us a-quiver; then a crash of cymbals, a jangle of bells, a hoarse applauding roar, and Coralie was in the midst of us, whirling past 'twixt earth and sky, now erect, flushed, radiant, now crouched to the flowing mane; swung and tossed and moulded by the maddening dance-music of the band. The mighty whip of the count in the frock-coat marked time with pistol-shots; his war-cry, whooping clear above the music, fired the blood with a passion for splendid deeds, as Coralie, laughing, exultant, crashed through the paper hoops. We gripped the red cloth in front of us, and our souls sped round and round with Coralie, leaping with her, prone with her, swung by mane or tail with her. It was not only the ravishment of her delirious feats, nor her cream-



coloured horse of fairy breed, long-tailed, roe-footed, an enchanted prince surely, if ever there was one ! It was her more than mortal beauty—displayed, too, under conditions never vouchsafed to us before—that held us spell-bound. What princess had arms so dazzlingly white, or went delicately clothed in such pink and spangles ? Hitherto we had known the outward woman as but a drab thing, hour-glass shaped, nearly legless, bunched here, constricted there, slow of movement, and given to deprecating lusty action of limb. Here was a revelation ! From henceforth our imaginations would have to be revised and corrected up to date. In one of those swift rushes the mind makes in high-strung moments, I saw myself and Coralie, close enfolded, pacing the world together, o’er hill and plain, through storied cities, past rows of applauding relations,—I in my Sunday knickerbockers, she in her pink and spangles.

Summers sicken, flowers fail and die, all beauty but rides round the ring and out at the portal ; even so Coralie passed in her turn, poised sideways, panting, on her steed ; lightly swayed as a tulip-bloom, bowing on this side and on that as she disappeared ; and with her went my heart and my soul, and all the light and the glory and the entrancement of the scene.

Harold woke up with a gasp “ Wasn’t she beautiful ? ” he said, in quite a subdued way for him. I felt a momentary pang. We had been friendly rivals before in many an exploit ; but here was altogether a more serious affair. Was this, then, to be the beginning of strife and coldness, of civil war on the hearthstone, and the sundering of old ties ? Then I recollected the true position of things, and felt very sorry for Harold ; for it was inexorably written that he would have to give way to me, since I was the elder. Rules were not made for nothing, in a sensibly constructed universe.

There was little more to wait for, now Coralie had gone ; yet I lingered still, on the chance of her appearing again. Next moment the clown tripped up and fell flat, with

magnificent artifice, and at once fresh emotions began to stir. Love had endured its little hour, and stern ambition now asserted itself. Oh, to be a splendid fellow like this, self-contained, ready of speech, agile beyond conception, braving the forces of society, his hand against every one, yet always getting the best of it ! What freshness of humour, what courtesy to dames, what triumphant ability to discomfit rivals, frock-coated and moustached though they might be ! And what a grand, self-confident straddle of the legs ! Who could desire a finer career than to go through life thus gorgeously equipped ! Success was his key-note, adroitness his panoply, and the mellow music of laughter his instant reward. Even Coralie's image wavered and receded. I would come back to her in the evening, of course ; but I would be a clown all the working hours of the day.

The short interval was ended : the band, with long-drawn chords, sounded a prelude touched with significance ; and the programme, in letters over-topping their fellows, proclaimed Zephyrine, the Bride of the Desert, in her unequalled bareback equestrian interlude. So sated was I already with beauty and with wit, that I hardly dared hope for a fresh emotion. Yet her title was tinged with romance, and Coralie's display had aroused in me an interest in her sex which even herself had failed to satisfy entirely.

Brayed in by trumpets, Zephyrine swung passionately into the arena. With a bound she stood erect, one foot upon each of her supple, plunging Arabs ; and at once I knew that my fate was sealed, my chapter closed, and the Bride of the Desert was the one bride for me. Black was her raiment, great silver stars shone through it, caught in the dusky twilight of her gauze ; black as her own hair were the two mighty steeds she bestrode. In a tempest they thundered by, in a whirlwind, a scirocco of tan ; her cheeks bore the kiss of an Eastern sun, and the sand-storms of her native desert were her satellites. What was Coralie, with her pink silk, her golden hair and slender limbs,

beside this magnificent, full-figured Cleopatra? In a twinkling we were scouring the desert—she and I and the two coal-black horses. Side by side, keeping pace in our swinging gallop, we distanced the ostrich, we outstrode the zebra ; and, as we went, it seemed the wilderness blossomed like the rose.

. . . . .

I know not rightly how we got home that evening. On the road there were everywhere strange presences, and the thud of phantom hoofs encircled us. In my nose was the pungent circus-smell ; the crack of the whip and the frank laugh of the clown were in my ears. The funny man thoughtfully abstained from conversation, and left our illusion quite alone, sparing us all jarring criticism and analysis ; and he gave me no chance, when he deposited us at our gate, to get rid of the clumsy expressions of gratitude I had been laboriously framing. For the rest of the evening, distraught and silent, I only heard the march-music of the band, playing on in some corner of my brain. When at last my head touched the pillow, in a trice I was with Zephyrine, riding the boundless Sahara, cheek to cheek, the world well lost ; while at times, through the sand-clouds that encircled us, glimmered the eyes of Coralie, touched, one fancied, with something of a tender reproach.

## A SAGA OF THE SEAS

**I**T happened one day that some ladies came to call, who were not at all the sort I was used to. They suffered from a grievance, so far as I could gather, and the burden of their plaint was Man—Men in general and Man in particular (Though the words were but spoken, I could clearly discern the capital M in their acid utterance.)

Of course I was not present officially, so to speak. Down below, in my sub-world of chair-legs and hearthrugs and the undersides of sofas, I was working out my own floor-problems, while they babbled on far above my head, considering me as but a chair-leg, or even something lower in the scale. Yet I was listening hard all the time, with that respectful consideration one gives to all grown-up people's remarks, so long as one knows no better.

It seemed a serious indictment enough, as they rolled it out. In tact, considerateness, and right appreciation, as well as in taste and æsthetic sensibiltics—we failed at every point, we breeched and bearded prentice-jobs of Nature ; and I began to feel like collapsing on the carpet from sheer spiritual anæmia. But when one of them, with a swing of her skirt, prostrated a whole regiment of my brave tin soldiers, and never apologized nor even offered her aid toward revivifying the battle-line, I could not help feeling that in tactfulness and consideration for others she was still a little to seek. And I said as much, with some directness of language.

That was the end of me, from a society point of view. Rudeness to visitors was the unpardonable sin, and in two seconds I had my marching orders, and was sullenly wending my way to the St. Helena of the nursery. As I climbed the stair, my thoughts reverted somehow to a game we

had been playing that very morning. It was the good old game of Rafts,—a game that will be played till all the oceans are dry and all the trees in the world are felled—and after And we were all crowded together on the precarious little platform, and Selina occupied every bit as much room as I did, and Charlotte's legs didn't dangle over any more than Harold's. The pitiless sun overhead beat on us all with tropic impartiality, and the hungry sharks, whose fins scored the limitless Pacific stretching out on every side, were impelled by an appetite that made no exceptions as to sex. When we shared the ultimate biscuit and circulated the last water-keg, the girls got an absolute fourth apiece, and neither more nor less ; and the only partiality shown was entirely in favour of Charlotte, who was allowed to perceive and to hail the saviour-sail on the horizon. And this was only because it was her turn to do so, not because she happened to be this or that. Surely, the rules of the raft were the rules of life, and in what, then, did these visitor-ladies' grievance consist ?

Puzzled and a little sulky, I pushed open the door of the deserted nursery, where the raft that had rocked beneath so many hopes and fears still occupied the ocean-floor. To the dull eye, that merely tarries upon the outsides of things, it might have appeared unromantic and even unraftlike, consisting only as it did of a round sponge-bath on a bald deal towel-horse placed flat on the floor. Even to myself much of the recent raft-glamour seemed to have departed as I half-mechanically stepped inside and curled myself up in it for a solitary voyage. Once I was in, however, the old magic and mystery returned in full flood, when I discovered that the inequalities of the towel-horse caused the bath to rock, slightly, indeed, but easily and incessantly. A few minutes of this delightful motion, and one was fairly launched. So those women below didn't want us ? Well, there were other women and other places, that did. And this was going to be no scrambling raft-affair, but a full-blooded voyage of the Man, equipped and purposeful, in search of what was his rightful own.

Whither should I shape my course, and what sort of vessel should I charter for the voyage? The shipping of all England was mine to pick from, and the far corners of the globe were my rightful inheritance. A frigate, of course, seemed the natural vehicle for a boy of spirit to set out in. And yet there was something rather "uppish" in commanding a frigate at the very first set-off, and little spread was left for the ambition. Frigates, too, could always be acquired later by sheer adventure; and your real hero generally saved up a square-rigged ship for the final achievement and the rapt return. No, it was a schooner that I was aboard of—a schooner whose masts raked devilishly as the leaping seas hissed along her low black gunwale. Many hare-brained youths started out on a mere cutter; but I was prudent, and besides I had some inkling of the serious affairs that were ahead.

I have said I was already on board; and, indeed, on this occasion I was too hungry for adventure to linger over what would have been a special delight at a period of more leisure—the dangle about the harbour, the choosing your craft, selecting your shipmates, stowing your cargo, and fitting up your private cabin with everything you might want to put your hand on in any emergency whatever. I could not wait for that. Out beyond soundings the big seas were racing westward and calling me, albatrosses hovered motionless, expectant of a comrade, and a thousand islands held each of them a fresh adventure, stored up, hidden away, awaiting production, expressly saved for me. We were humming, close-hauled, down the Channel, spray in the eyes and the shrouds thrilling musically, in much less time than the average man would have taken to transfer his Gladstone bag and his rugs from the train to a sheltered place on the promenade-deck of the tame daily steamer.

So long as we were in pilotage I stuck manfully to the wheel. The undertaking was mine, and with it all its responsibilities, and there was some tricky steering to be done as we sped by headland and bay, ere we breasted the

great seas outside and the land fell away behind us. But as soon as the Atlantic had opened out I began to feel that it would be rather nice to take tea by myself in my own cabin, and it therefore became necessary to invent a comrade or two, to take their turn at the wheel.

This was easy enough. A friend or two of my own age, from among the boys I knew; a friend or two from characters in the books I knew; and a friend or two from No-man's-land, where every fellow's a born sailor; and the crew was complete. I addressed them on the poop, divided them into watches, gave instructions I should be summoned on the first sign of pirates, whales, or Frenchmen, and retired below to a well-earned spell of relaxation.

That was the right sort of cabin that I stepped into, shutting the door behind me with a click. Of course, firearms were the first thing I looked for, and there they were, sure enough, in their racks, dozens of 'em—double-barrelled guns, and repeating-rifles, and long pistols, and shiny plated revolvers. I rang up the steward and ordered tea, with scones, and jam in its native pots—none of your finicking shallow glass dishes; and, when properly streaked with jam, and blown out with tea, I went through the armoury, clicked the rifles and revolvers, tested the edges of the cutlasses with my thumb, and filled the cartridge-belts chock-full. Everything was there, and of the best quality, just as if I had spent a whole fortnight knocking about Plymouth and ordering things. Clearly, if this cruise came to grief, it would not be for want of equipment.

Just as I was beginning on the lockers and the drawers, the watch reported icebergs on both bows—and, what was more to the point, coveys of Polar bears on the icebergs. I grasped a rifle or two, and hastened on deck. The spectacle was indeed magnificent—it generally is, with icebergs on both bows, and these were exceptionally enormous icebergs. But I hadn't come there to paint Academy pictures, so the captain's gig was in the water and manned almost ere the boatswain's whistle had ceased sounding, and we

were pulling hard for the Polar bears—myself and the rifles in the stern-sheets.

I have rarely enjoyed better shooting than I got during that afternoon's tramp over the icebergs. Perhaps I was in specially good form ; perhaps the bears " rose " well. Anyhow, the bag was a portentous one. In later days, on reading of the growing scarcity of Polar bears, my conscience has pricked me , but that afternoon I experienced no compunction. Nevertheless, when the huge pile of skins had been hoisted on board, and a stiff grog had been served out to the crew of the captain's gig, I ordered the schooner's head to be set due south. For icebergs were played out, for the moment, and it was getting to be time for something more tropical.

Tropical was a mild expression of what was to come, as was shortly proved. It was about three bells in the next day's forenoon watch when the look-out man first sighted the pirate brigantine. I disliked the looks of her from the first, and, after piping all hands to quarters, had the brass carronade on the fore-deck crammed with grape to the muzzle.

This proved a wise precaution. For the flagitious pirate craft, having crept up to us under the colours of the Swiss Republic, a State with which we were just then on the best possible terms, suddenly shook out the skull-and-cross-bones at her masthead, and let fly with round-shot at close quarters, knocking into pieces several of my crew, who could ill be spared. The sight of their disconnected limbs aroused my ire to its utmost height, and I let them have the contents of the brass carronade, with ghastly effect. Next moment the hulls of the two ships were grinding together, the cold steel flashed from its scabbard, and the death-grapple had begun.

In spite of the deadly work of my grape-gorged carronade, our foe still outnumbered us, I reckoned, by three to one. Honour forbade my fixing it at a lower figure—this was the minimum rate at which one dared to do business with pirates. They were stark veterans, too, every man



seamed with ancient sabre-cuts, whereas my crew had many of them hardly attained the maturity which is the gift of ten long summers—and the whole thing was so sudden that I had no time to invent a reinforcement of riper years. It was not surprising, therefore, that my dauntless boarding-party, axe in hand and cutlass between teeth, fought their way to the pirates' deck only to be repulsed again and yet again, and that our planks were soon slippery with our own ungrudged and inexhaustible blood. At this critical point in the conflict, the bo'sun, grasping me by the arm, drew my attention to a magnificent British man-of-war, just hove-to in the offing, while the signalman, his glass at his eye, reported that she was inquiring whether we wanted any assistance or preferred to go through with the little job ourselves.

This veiled attempt to share our laurels with us, courteously as it was worded, put me on my mettle. Wiping the blood out of my eyes, I ordered the signalman to reply instantly, with the half-dozen or so of flags that he had at his disposal, that much as we appreciated the valour of the regular service, and the delicacy of spirit that animated its commanders, still this was an orthodox case of the young gentleman-adventurer *versus* the unshaved pirate, and Her Majesty's Marine had nothing to do but to form the usual admiring and applauding background. Then, rallying round me the remnant of my faithful crew, I selected a fresh cutlass (I had worn out three already) and plunged once more into the pleasing carnage.

The result was not long doubtful. Indeed, I could not allow it to be, as I was already getting somewhat bored with the pirate business, and was wanting to get on to something more southern and sensuous. All serious resistance came to an end as soon as I had reached the quarter-deck and cut down the pirate chief—a fine black-bearded fellow in his way, but hardly up to date in his parry-and-thrust business. Those whom our cutlasses had spared were marched out along their own plank, in the approved old fashion ; and in time the scuppers relieved the decks of the

blood that made traffic temporarily impossible. And all the time the British man-of-war admired and applauded in the offing.

As soon as we had got through with the necessary throat-cutting and swabbing-up, all hands set to work to discover treasure ; and soon the deck shone bravely with ingots and Mexican dollars and church plate. There were ropes of pearls, too, and big stacks of *nougat* ; and rubies, and gold watches, and Turkish Delight in tubs. But I left these trifles to my crew, and continued the search alone. For by this time I had determined that there should be a Princess on board carried off to be sold in captivity to the bold bad Moors, and now with beating heart awaiting her rescue by me, the Perseus of her dreams.

I came upon her at last in the big state-cabin in the stern ; and she wore a holland pinafore over her Princess-clothes, and she had brown wavy hair, hanging down her back, just like—well, never mind, she had brown wavy hair. When gentle-folk meet, courtesies pass ; and I will not weary other people with relating all the compliments and counter-compliments that we exchanged, all in the most approved manner. Occasions, like this, when tongues wagged smoothly and speech flowed free, were always especially pleasing to me, who am naturally inclined to be tongue-tied with women. But at last ceremony was over, and we sat on the table and swung our legs and agreed to be fast friends. And I showed her my latest knife—one-bladed, horn-handled, terrific, hung round my neck with string ; and she showed me the chiefest treasures the ship contained, hidden away in a most private and particular locker—a musical box with a glass top that let you see the works, and a railway train with real lines and a real tunnel, and a tin iron-clad that followed a magnet, and was ever so much handier in many respects than the real full-sized thing that still lay and applauded in the offing.

There was high feasting that night in my cabin. We invited the captain of the man-of-war—one could hardly do less, it seemed to me—and the Princess took one end

of the table and I took the other, and the captain was very kind and nice, and told us fairy-stories, and asked us both to come and stay with him next Christmas, and promised we should have some hunting, on real ponies. When he left I gave him some ingots and things, and saw him into his boat ; and then I went round the ship and addressed the crew in several set speeches, which moved them deeply, and with my own hands loaded up the carronade with grape-shot till it ran over at the mouth. This done, I retired into the cabin with the Princess, and locked the door. And first we started the musical box, taking turns to wind it up ; and then we made toffee in the cabin-stove, and then we ran the train round and round the room, and through and through the tunnel ; and lastly we swam the tin ironclad in the bath, with the soap-dish for a pirate.

Next morning the air was rich with spices, porpoises rolled and gambolled round the bows, and the South Sea Islands lay full in view (they were the *real* South Sea Islands, of course—not the badly furnished journey-men-islands that are to be perceived on the map). As for the pirate brigantine and the man-of-war, I don't really know what became of them. They had played their part very well, for the time, but I wasn't going to bother to account for them, so I just let them evaporate quietly. The islands provided plenty of fresh occupation. For here were little bays of silvery sand, dotted with land-crabs ; groves of palm-trees wherein monkeys flusked and pelted each other with coco-nuts ; and caves and sites for stockades, and hidden treasures significantly indicated by skulls, in riotous plenty ; while birds and beasts of every colour and all latitudes made pleasing noises which excited the sporting instinct.

The islands lay conveniently close together, which necessitated careful steering as we threaded the devious and intricate channels that separated them. Of course no one else could be trusted at the wheel, so it is not surprising that for some time I quite forgot that there was

such a thing as a Princess on board. This is too much the masculine way, whenever there's any real business doing. However, I remembered her as soon as the anchor was dropped, and I went below and consoled her, and we had breakfast together, and she was allowed to "pour out," which quite made up for everything. When breakfast was over we ordered out the captain's gig, and rowed all about the islands, and paddled, and explored, and hunted bisons and beetles and butterflies, and found everything we wanted. And I gave her pink shells and tortoises and great milky pearls and little green lizards; and she gave me guinea-pigs, and coral to make into waistcoat-buttons, and tame sea-otters, and a real pirate's powder-horn. It was a prolific day and a long-lasting one, and weary were we with all our hunting and our getting and our gathering, when at last we clambered into the captain's gig and rowed back to a late tea.

The following day my conscience rose up and accused me. This was not what I had come out to do. These triflings with pearls and parrakeets, these *al fresco* luncheons off yams and bananas—there was no "making of history" about them. I resolved that without further dallying I would turn to and capture the French frigate, according to the original programme. So we upped anchor with the morning tide, and set all sail for San Salvador.

Of course I had no idea where San Salvador really was. I haven't now, for that matter. But it seemed a right-sounding sort of name for a place that was to have a bay that was to hold a French frigate that was to be cut out; so, as I said, we sailed for San Salvador and made the bay about eight bells that evening, and saw the top-masts of the frigate over the headland that sheltered her. And forthwith there was summoned a Council of War.

It is a very serious matter, a Council of War. We had not held one hitherto, pirates and truck of that sort not calling for such solemn treatment. But in an affair that might almost be called international, it seemed well to proceed gravely and by regular steps. So we met in my

cabin—the Princess, and the bo'sun, and a boy from the real-life lot, and a man from among the book-men, and a fellow from No-man's-land, and myself in the chair.

The bo'sun had taken part in so many cuttings-out during his past career that practically he did all the talking, and was the Council of War himself. It was to be an affair of boats, he explained. A boat's-crew would be told off to cut the cables, and two boat's-crews to climb stealthily on board and overpower the sleeping Frenchmen, and two more boats'-crews to haul the doomed vessel out of the bay. *This made rather a demand on my limited resources as to crews ; but I was prepared to stretch a point in a case like this, and I speedily brought my numbers up to the requisite efficiency.*

The night was both moonless and starless—I had arranged all that—when the boats pushed off from the side of our vessel, and made their way toward the ship that, unfortunately for itself, had been singled out by Fate to carry me home in triumph. I was in excellent spirits, and, indeed, as I stepped over the side, a lawless idea crossed my mind, of discovering another Princess on board the frigate—a French one this time ; I had heard that sort was rather nice. But I abandoned the notion at once, recollecting that the heroes of all history had always been noted for their unswerving constancy.

The French captain was snug in bed when I clambered in through his cabin window and held a naked cutlass to his throat. Naturally he was surprised and considerably alarmed, till I discharged one of my set speeches at him, pointing out that my men already had his crew under hatchway, that his vessel was even then being towed out of harbour, and that, on his accepting the situation with a good grace, his person and private property would be treated with all the respect due to the representative of a great nation for which I entertained feelings of the profoundest admiration and regard and all that sort of thing. It was a beautiful speech. The Frenchman at once presented me with his parole, in the usual way, and, in a

reply of some power and pathos, only begged that I would retire a moment while he put on his trousers. This I gracefully consented to do, and the incident ended.

Two of my boats were sunk by the fire from the forts on the shore, and several brave fellows were severely wounded in the hand-to-hand struggle with the French crew for the possession of the frigate. But the bo'sun's admirable strategy, and my own reckless gallantry in securing the French captain at the outset, had the fortunate result of keeping down the death-rate. It was all for the sake of the Princess that I had arranged so comparatively tame a victory. For myself, I rather liked a fair amount of blood-letting, red-hot shot, and flying splinters. But when you have girls about the place, they have got to be considered to a certain extent.

There was another supper-party that night, in my cabin, as soon as we had got well out to sea ; and the French captain, who was the guest of the evening, was in the greatest possible form. We became sworn friends, and exchanged invitations to come and stay at each other's homes, and really it was quite difficult to induce him to take his leave. But at last he and his crew were bundled into their boats ; and after I had pressed some pirate bullion upon them—delicately, of course, but in a pleasant manner that admitted of no denial—the gallant fellows quite broke down, and we parted, our bosoms heaving with a full sense of each other's magnanimity and good-fellowship.

The next day, which was nearly all taken up with shifting our quarters into the new frigate, so honourably and easily acquired, was a very pleasant one, as every one who has gone up in the world and moved into a larger house will readily understand. At last I had grim, black guns all along each side, instead of a rotten brass carronade ; at last I had a square-rigged ship, with real yards, and a proper quarter-deck. In fact, now that I had soared as high as could be hoped in a single voyage, it seemed about time to go home and cut a dash and show off a bit. The worst of this ocean-theatre was, it held no proper audience. It

was hard, of course, to relinquish all the adventures that still lay untouched in these Southern seas. Whaling, for instance, had not yet been entered upon ; the joys of exploration and strange inland cities innocent of the white man, still awaited me ; and the book of wrecks and rescues was not yet even opened. But I had achieved a frigate and a Princess, and that was not so bad for a beginning and more than enough to show off with before those dull un-adventurous folk who continued on their mill-horse round at home.

The voyage home was a record one, so far as mere speed was concerned, and all adventures were scornfully left behind, as we rattled along, for other adventurers who had still their laurels to win. Hardly later than the noon of next day we dropped anchor in Plymouth Sound, and heard the intoxicating clamour of bells, the roar of artillery, and the hoarse cheers of an excited populace surging down to the quays, that told us we were being appreciated at something like our true merits. The Lord Mayor was waiting there to receive us, and with him several Admirals of the Fleet, as we walked down the lane of pushing, enthusiastic Devonians, the Princess and I, and our war-worn, weather-beaten, spoil-laden crew. Everybody was very nice about the French frigate, and the pirate booty, and the scars still fresh on our young limbs ; yet I think what I liked best of all was that they all pronounced the Princess to be a duck, and a peerless, brown-haired darling, and a true mate for a hero, and of the right Princess-breed.

The air was thick with invitations and with the smell of civic banquets in a forward stage ; but I sternly waved all festivities aside. The coaches-and-four I had ordered immediately on arriving were blocking the whole of the High Street ; the champing of bits and the pawing of gravel summoned us to take our seats and be off, to where the real performance awaited us, compared with which all this was but an interlude. I placed the Princess in the most highly gilded coach of the lot, and mounted to my place at her side ; and the rest of the crew scrambled on

board the others as best they might. The whips cracked and the crowd scattered and cheered as we broke into a gallop for home. The noisy bells burst into a farewell peal—

Yes, that was undoubtedly the usual bell for school-room tea. And high time too, I thought, as I tumbled out of the bath, which was beginning to feel very hard to the projecting portions of my frame-work. As I trotted downstairs, hungrier even than usual, farewells floated up from the front door, and I heard the departing voices of our angular elderly visitors as they made their way down the walk. Man was still catching it, apparently—Man was getting it hot. And much Man cared ! The seas were his, and their islands ; he had his frigates for the taking, his pirates and their hoards for an unregarded cutlass-stroke or two ; and there were Princesses in plenty waiting for him somewhere—Princesses of the right sort.



## THE RELUCTANT DRAGON

**F**OOTPRINTS in the snow have been unfailing provokers of sentiment ever since snow was first a white wonder in this drab-coloured world of ours. In a poetry-book presented to one of us by an aunt, there was a poem by one Wordsworth in which they stood out strongly with a picture all to themselves, too—but we didn't think very highly either of the poem or the sentiment. Footprints in the sand, now, were quite another matter, and we grasped Crusoe's attitude of mind much more easily than Wordsworth's. Excitement and mystery, curiosity and suspense—these were the only sentiments that tracks, whether in sand or in snow, were able to arouse in us.

We had awakened early that winter morning, puzzled at first by the added light that filled the room. Then, when the truth at last fully dawned on us and we knew that snow-balling was no longer a wistful dream, but a solid certainty waiting for us, outside, it was a mere brute fight for the necessary clothes, and the lacing of boots seemed a clumsy invention, and the buttoning of coats an unduly tedious form of fastening, with all that snow going to waste at our very door.

When dinner-time came we had to be dragged in by the scruff of our necks. The short armistice over, the combat was resumed, but presently Charlotte and I, a little weary of contests and of missiles that ran shudderingly down inside one's clothes, forsook the trampled battlefield of the lawn and went exploring the blank virgin spaces of the white world that lay beyond. It stretched away unbroken on every side of us, this mysterious soft garment under which our familiar world had so suddenly hidden itself. Faint imprints showed where a casual bird had

alighted, but of other traffic there was next to no sign; which made these strange tracks all the more puzzling.

We came across them first at the corner of the shrubbery, and pored over them long, our hands on our knees. Experienced trappers that we knew ourselves to be, it was annoying to be brought up suddenly by a beast we could not at once identify.

"Don't you know?" said Charlotte rather scornfully. "Thought you knew all the beasts that ever was"

This put me on my mettle, and I hastily rattled off a string of animal names embracing both the arctic and the tropic zones, but without much real confidence.

"No," said Charlotte, on consideration; "they won't any of 'em quite do. Seems like something *lizardy*. Did you say a *iguanodon*? Might be that, p'raps. But that's not British, and we want a real British beast. I think it's a dragon!"

"Tisn't half big enough," I objected

"Well, all dragons must be small to begin with," said Charlotte. "like everything else. P'raps this is a little dragon who's got lost. A little dragon would be rather nice to have. He might scratch and spit, but he couldn't *do* anything really. Let's track him down!"

So we set off into the wide snow-clad world, hand in hand, our hearts big with expectation,—complacently confident that by a few smudgy traces in the snow we were in a fair way to capture a half-grown specimen of a fabulous beast

We ran the monster across the paddock and along the hedge of the next field, and then he took to the road like any tame civilized tax-payer. Here his tracks became blended with and lost among more ordinary footprints, but imagination and a fixed idea will do a great deal, and we were sure we knew the direction a dragon would naturally take. The traces, too, kept reappearing at intervals—at least, Charlotte maintained they did, and as it was *her* dragon I left the following of the slot to her and trotted

along peacefully, feeling that it was an expedition anyhow and something was sure to come out of it.

Charlotte took me across another field or two, and through a copse, and into a fresh road ; and I began to feel sure it was only her confounded pride that made her go on pretending to see dragon-tracks instead of owning she was entirely at fault, like a reasonable person. At last she dragged me excitedly through a gap in a hedge of an obviously private character ; the waste, open world of field and hedgerow disappeared, and we found ourselves in a garden, well-kept, secluded, most undragon-haunted in appearance. Once inside, I knew where we were. This was the garden of my friend the circus-man, though I had never approached it before by a lawless gap, from this unfamiliar side. And here was the circus-man himself, placidly smoking a pipe as he strolled up and down the walks. I stepped up to him and asked him politely if he had lately seen a Beast.

"May I inquire," he said, with all civility, "what particular sort of a Beast you may happen to be looking for ?"

"It's a *lizardy* sort of Beast," I explained. "Charlotte says it's a dragon, but she doesn't really know much about beasts."

The circus-man looked round about him slowly. "I don't *think*," he said, "that I've seen a dragon in these parts recently. But if I come across one I'll know it belongs to you, and I'll have him taken round to you at once."

"Thank you very much," said Charlotte, "but don't *trouble* about it, please, 'cos p'raps it isn't a dragon after all. Only I thought I saw his little footprints in the snow, and we followed 'em up, and they seemed to lead right in here, but maybe it's all a mistake, and thank you all the same."

"Oh, no trouble at all," said the circus-man cheerfully. "I should be only too pleased. But of course, as you say, it *may* be a mistake. And it's getting dark, and he seems to have got away for the present, whatever he is. 'You'd

better come in and have some tea. I'm quite alone, and we'll make a roaring fire, and I've got the biggest Book of Beasts you ever saw. It's got every beast in the world, and all of 'em coloured ; and we'll try and find *your* beast in it ! ”

We were always ready for tea at any time, and especially when combined with beasts. There was marmalade, too, and apricot jam, brought in expressly for us ; and afterwards the beast-book was spread out, and, as the man had truly said, it contained every sort of beast that had ever been in the world.

The striking of six o'clock set the more prudent Charlotte nudging me, and we recalled ourselves with an effort from Beast-land, and reluctantly stood up to go

“ Here, I'm coming along with you,” said the circus-man. “ I want another pipe, and a walk'll do me good. You needn't talk to me unless you like ”

Our spirits rose to their wonted level again. The way had seemed so long, the outside world so dark and eerie, after the bright warm room and the highly-coloured beast-book. But a walk with a real Man—why, that was a treat in itself ! We set off briskly, the Man in the middle. I looked up at him and wondered whether I should ever live to smoke a big pipe with that careless sort of majesty ! But Charlotte, whose young mind was not set on tobacco as a possible goal, made herself heard from the other side.

“ Now, then,” she said, “ tell us a story, please, won't you ? ”

The Man sighed heavily and looked about him. “ I knew it,” he groaned. “ I *knew* I should have to tell a story. Oh, why did I leave my pleasant fireside ? Well, I *will* tell you a story. Only let me think a minute.”

So he thought a minute, and then he told us this story :

Long ago—might have been hundreds of years ago—in a cottage half-way between this village and yonder shoulder of the Downs up there, a shepherd lived with his wife and their little son. Now the shepherd spent his days—and at certain times of the year his nights too—up on

the wide ocean-bosom of the Downs, with only the sun and the stars and the sheep for company, and the friendly chattering world of men and women far out of sight and hearing. But his little son, when he wasn't helping his father, and often when he was as well, spent much of his time buried in big volumes that he borrowed from the affable gentry and interested parsons of the country round about. And his parents were very fond of him, and rather proud of him too, though they didn't let on in his hearing, so he was left to go his own way and read as much as he liked, and instead of frequently getting a cuff on the side of the head, as might very well have happened to him, he was treated more or less as an equal by his parents, who sensibly thought it a very fair division of labour that they should supply the practical knowledge, and he the book-learning. They knew that book-learning often came in useful at a pinch, in spite of what their neighbours said. What the Boy chiefly dabbled in was natural history and fairy-tales, and he just took them as they came, in a sandwichy sort of way, without making any distinctions; and really his course of reading strikes one as rather sensible.

One evening the shepherd, who for some nights past had been disturbed and preoccupied, and off his usual mental balance, came home all of a tremble, and, sitting down at the table where his wife and son were peacefully employed, she with her seam, he in following out the adventures of the Giant with no Heart in his Body, exclaimed with much agitation:

"It's all up with me, Maria! Never no more can I go up on them there Downs, was it ever so!"

"Now don't you take on like that," said his wife, who was a *very* sensible woman: "but tell us all about it first, whatever it is as has given you this shake-up and then me and you and the son here, between us, we ought to be able to get to the bottom of it!"

"It began some nights ago," said the shepherd. "You know that cave up there—I never liked it, somehow, and the sheep never liked it neither, and when sheep don't like

a thing there's generally some reason for it. Well, for some time past there's been faint noises coming from that cave—noises like heavy sighings, with grunts mixed up in them ; and sometimes a snoring, far away down—*real* snoring, yet somehow not *honest* snoring, like you and me o' nights, you know ! ”

“ I know,” remarked the Boy quietly.

“ Of course I was terrible frightened,” the shepherd went on ; “ yet somehow I couldn't keep away. So this very evening, before I come down, I took a cast round by the cave, quietly. And there—O Lord ! there I saw him at last, as plain as I see you ! ”

“ Saw *who* ? ” said his wife, beginning to share in her husband's nervous terror.

“ Why *him*, I'm a-telling you ! ” said the shepherd. “ He was sticking half-way out of the cave, and seemed to be enjoying of the cool of the evening in a poetical sort of way. He was as big as four cart-horses, and all covered with shiny scales—deep-blue scales at the top of him, shading off to a tender sort o' green below. As he breathed, there was that sort of flicker over his nostrils that you see over our chalk roads on a baking windless day in summer. He had his chin on his paws, and I should say he was meditating about things. Oh, yes, a peaceable sort o' beast enough, and not ramping or carrying on or doing anything but what was quite right and proper. I admit all that. And yet, what am I to do ? *Scales*, you know, and claws, and a tail for certain, though I didn't see that end of him—I ain't *used* to 'em, and I don't *hold* with 'em, and that's a fact ! ”

The Boy, who had apparently been absorbed in his book during his father's recital, now closed the volume, yawned, clasped his hands behind his head, and said sleepily :

“ It's all right, father. Don't you worry. It's only a dragon.”

“ Only a dragon ? ” cried his father. “ What do you mean, sitting there, you and your dragons ? *Only* a dragon indeed ! And what do *you* know about it ? ”

" 'Cos it *is*, and 'cos I *do* know," replied the Boy quietly. " Look here, father, you know we've each of us got our line. *You* know about sheep, and weather, and things ; *I* know about dragons. I always said, you know, that that cave up there was a dragon-cave. I always said it must have belonged to a dragon some time, and ought to belong to a dragon now, if rules count for anything. Well, now you tell me it *has* got a dragon, and so *that's* all right. I'm not half as much surprised as when you told me it *hadn't* got a dragon. Rules always come right if you wait quietly. Now, please, just leave this all to me. And I'll stroll up to-morrow morning—no, in the morning I can't, I've got a whole heap of things to do—well, perhaps in the evening, if I'm quite free, I'll go up and have a talk to him, and you'll find it'll be all right. Only please, don't you go worrying round there without me. You don't understand 'em a bit, and they're very sensitive, you know ! "

" He's quite right, father," said the sensible mother. " As he says, dragons is his line and not ours. He's wonderful knowing about book-beasts, as every one allows. And to tell the truth, I'm not half happy in my own mind, thinking of that poor animal lying alone up there, without a bit o' hot supper or anyone to change the news with ; and maybe we'll be able to do something for him ; and if he ain't quite respectable our Boy'll find it out quick enough. He's got a pleasant sort o' way with him that makes everybody tell him everything "

Next day, after he'd had his tea, the Boy strolled up the chalky track that led to the summit of the Downs ; and there, sure enough, he found the dragon, stretched lazily on the sward in front of his cave. The view from that point was a magnificent one. To the right and left, the bare and billowy leagues of Downs ; in front, the vale, with its clustered homesteads, its threads of white roads running through orchards and well-tilled acreage, and, far away, a hint of grey old cities on the horizon. A cool breeze played over the surface of the grass, and the silver shoulder of a large moon was showing above distant junipers. No

wonder the dragon seemed in a peaceful and contented mood ; indeed, as the Boy approached he could hear the beast purring with a happy regularity. " Well, we live and learn ! " he said to himself. " None of my books ever told me that dragons purred ! "

" Hullo, dragon ! " said the Boy quietly, when he had got up to him.

The dragon, on hearing the approaching footsteps, made the beginning of a courteous effort to rise. But when he saw it was a Boy, he set his eyebrows severely.

" Now don't you hit me," he said ; " or bung stones, or squirt water, or anything. I won't have it, I tell you ! "

" Not goin' to hit you," said the Boy wearily, dropping on the grass beside the beast : " and don't, for goodness' sake, keep on saying ' Don't ' ; I hear so much of it, and it's monotonous, and makes me tired. I've simply looked in to ask you how you were and all that sort of thing ; but if I'm in the way I can easily clear out. I've lots of friends, and no one can say I'm in the habit of shoving myself in where I'm not wanted ! "

" No, no, don't go off in a huff," said the dragon hastily ; " fact is—I'm as happy up here as the day's long ; never without an occupation, dear fellow, never without an occupation ! And yet, between ourselves, it is a trifle dull at times."

The Boy bit off a stalk of grass and chewed it. " Going to make a long stay here ? " he asked politely.

" Can't hardly say at present," replied the dragon. " It seems a nice place enough—but I've only been here a short time, and one must look about and reflect and consider before settling down. It's rather a serious thing, settling down. Besides—now I'm going to tell you something ! You'd never guess it if you tried ever so !—fact is, I'm such a confoundedly lazy beggar ! "

" You surprise me," said the Boy civilly.

" It's the sad truth," the dragon went on, settling down between his paws and evidently delighted to have found a



listener at last : " and I fancy that's really how I came to be here. You see all the other fellows were so active and *earnest* and all that sort of thing—always rampaging, and skirmishing, and scouring the desert sands, and pacing the margin of the sea, and chasing knights all over the place, and devouring damsels, and going on generally—whereas I liked to get my meals regular and then to prop my back against a bit of rock and snooze a bit, and wake up and think of things going on and how they kept going on just the same, you know ! So when it happened I got fairly caught."

" When *what* happened, please ? " asked the Boy.

" That's just what I don't precisely know," said the dragon. " I suppose the earth sneezed, or shook itself, or the bottom dropped out of something. Anyhow there was a shake and a roar and a general stramash, and I found myself miles away underground and wedged in as tight as tight. Well, thank goodness, my wants are few, and at any rate I had peace and quietness and wasn't always being asked to come along and *do* something. And I've got such an active mind—always occupied, I assure you ! But time went on, and there was a certain sameness about the life, and at last I began to think it would be fun to work my way upstairs and see what you other fellows were doing. So I scratched and burrowed, and worked this way and that way and at last I came out through this cave here. And I like the country, and the view, and the people—what I've seen of 'em—and on the whole I feel inclined to settle down here."

" What's your mind always occupied about ? " asked the Boy. " That's what I want to know."

The dragon coloured slightly and looked away. Presently he said bashfully :

" Did you ever—just for fun—try to make up poetry—verses, you know ? "

" 'Course I have," said the Boy. " Heaps of it. And some of it's quite good, I feel sure, only there's no one here cares about it. Mother's very kind and all that, when I

read it to her, and so's father for that matter. But somehow they don't seem to——"

"Exactly," cried the dragon; "my own case exactly. They don't seem to, and you can't argue with 'em about it. Now you've got culture, you have, I could tell it on you at once, and I should just like your candid opinion about some little things I threw off lightly, when I was down there. I'm awfully pleased to have met you, and I'm hoping the other neighbours will be equally agreeable. There was a very nice old gentleman up here only last night, but he didn't seem to want to intrude.

"That was my father," said the Boy, "and he is a nice old gentleman, and I'll introduce you some day if you like."

"Can't you two come up here and dine or something to-morrow?" asked the dragon eagerly. "Only, of course, if you've got nothing better to do," he added politely.

"Thanks awfully," said the Boy, "but we don't go out anywhere without my mother, and, to tell you the truth, I'm afraid she mightn't quite approve of you. You see there's no getting over the hard fact that you're a dragon, is there? And when you talk of settling down, and the neighbours, and so on, I can't help feeling that you don't quite realize your position. You're an enemy of the human race, you see!"

"Haven't got an enemy in the world," said the dragon cheerfully. "Too lazy to make 'em, to begin with. And if I do read other fellows my poetry, I'm always ready to listen to theirs!"

"Oh, dear!" cried the Boy, "I wish you'd try and grasp the situation properly. When the other people find you out, they'll come after you with spears and swords and all sorts of things. You'll have to be exterminated, according to their way of looking at it! You're a scourge, and a pest, and a baneful monster!"

"Not a word of truth in it," said the dragon, wagging his head solemnly. "Character'll bear the strictest investigation. And now, there's a little sonnet-thing I was working on when you appeared on the scene——"

"Oh, if you *won't* be sensible," cried the Boy, getting up, "I'm going off home. No, I can't stop for sonnets ; my mother's sitting up. I'll look you up to-morrow, some time or other, and do for goodness' sake try and realize that you're a pestilential scourge, or you'll find yourself in a most awful fix. Good night !"

The Boy found it an easy matter to set the mind of his parents at ease about his new friend. They had always left that branch to him, and they took his word without a murmur. The shepherd was formally introduced and many compliments and kind inquiries were exchanged. His wife, however, though expressing her willingness to do anything she could—to mend things, or set the cave to rights, or cook a little something when the dragon had been poring over sonnets and forgotten his meals, as male things *will* do, could not be brought to recognize him formally. The fact that he was a dragon and "they didn't know who he was" seemed to count for everything with her. She made no objection, however, to her little son spending his evenings with the dragon quietly, so long as he was home by nine o'clock : and many a pleasant night they had, sitting on the sward, while the dragon told stories of old, old times, when dragons were quite plentiful and the world was a livelier place than it is now, and life was full of thrills and jumps and surprises.

What the Boy had feared, however, soon came to pass. The most modest and retiring dragon in the world, if he's as big as four cart-horses and covered with blue scales, cannot keep altogether out of the public view. And so in the village tavern of nights the fact that a real live dragon sat brooding in the cave on the Downs was naturally a subject for talk. Though the villagers were extremely frightened, they were rather proud as well. It was a distinction to have a dragon of your own, and it was felt to be a feather in the cap of the village. Still, all were agreed this sort of thing couldn't be allowed to go on. The dreadful beast must be exterminated, the country-side must be freed from this pest, this terror, this destroying scourge.

The fact that not even a hen-roost was the worse for the dragon's arrival wasn't allowed to have anything to do with it. He was a dragon, and he couldn't deny it, and if he didn't choose to behave as such that was his own look-out. But in spite of much valiant talk no hero was found willing to take sword and spear and free the suffering village and win deathless fame ; and each night's heated discussion always ended in nothing. Meanwhile the dragon, a happy Bohemian, lolled on the turf, enjoyed the sunsets, told antediluvian anecdotes to the Boy, and polished his old verses while meditating on fresh ones.

One day the Boy, on walking into the village, found everything wearing a festal appearance which was not to be accounted for in the calendar. Carpets and gay-coloured stuffs were hung out of the windows, the church-bells clamoured noisily, the little street was flower-strewn and the whole population jostled each other along either side of it, chattering, shoving, and ordering each other to stand back. The Boy saw a friend of his own age in the crowd and hailed him.

"What's up?" he cried. "Is it the players, or bears, or a circus, or what?"

"It's all right," his friend hailed back. "He's a-coming."

"Who's a-coming?" demanded the Boy, thrusting into the throng.

"Why, St. George, of course," replied his friend. "He's heard tell of our dragon, and he's comin' on purpose to slay the deadly beast, and free us from his horrid yoke. O my ! won't there be a jolly fight !"

Here was news indeed ! The Boy felt that he ought to make quite sure for himself, and he wriggled himself in between the legs of his good-natured elders, abusing them all the time for their unmannerly habit of shoving. Once in the front rank, he breathlessly awaited the arrival.

Presently from the far-away end of the line came the sound of cheering. Next, the measured tramp of a great war-horse made his heart beat quicker, and then he found

himself cheering with the rest, as, amidst welcoming shouts, shrill cries of women, uplifting of babies, and waving of handkerchiefs, St. George paced slowly up the street. The Boy's heart stood still and he breathed with sobs, the beauty and the grace of the hero were so far beyond anything he had yet seen. His fluted armour was inlaid with gold, his plumed helmet hung at his saddle-bow, and his thick fair hair framed a face gracious and gentle beyond expression till you caught the sternness in his eyes. He drew rein in front of the little inn, and the villagers crowded round with greetings and thanks and voluble statements of their wrongs and grievances and oppressions. The Boy heard the grave gentle voice of the Saint, assuring them that all would be well now, and that he would stand by them and see them righted and free them from their foe ; then he dismounted and passed through the doorway and the crowd poured in after him. But the Boy made off up the hill as fast as he could lay his legs to the ground.

"It's all up, dragon !" he shouted as soon as he was within sight of the beast "He's coming ! He's here now ! You'll have to pull yourself together and *do* something at last !"

The dragon was licking his scales and rubbing them with a bit of house-flannel the Boy's mother had lent him, till he shone like a great turquoise.

"Don't be *violent*, Boy," he said without looking round. "Sit down and get your breath, and try and remember that the noun governs the verb, and then perhaps you'll be good enough to tell me *who's* coming ?"

"That's right, take it coolly," said the Boy. "Hope you'll be half as cool when I've got through with my news. It's only St. George who's coming, that's all ; he rode into the village half an hour ago. Of course you can lick him—a great big fellow like you ! But I thought I'd warn you, 'cos he's sure to be round early, and he's got the longest, wickedest-looking spear you ever did see !" And the Boy got up and began to jump round in sheer delight at the prospect of the battle.

"O deary, deary me," moaned the dragon; "this is too awful. I won't see him, and that's flat. I don't want to know the fellow at all. I'm sure he's not nice. You must tell him to go away at once, please. Say he can write if he likes, but I can't give him an interview. I'm not seeing anybody at present."

"Now, dragon, dragon," said the Boy imploringly, "don't be perverse and wrong-headed. You've *got* to fight him some time or other, you know, 'cos he's St. George and you're the dragon. Better get it over, and then we can go on with the sonnets. And you ought to consider other people a little, too. If it's been dull up here for you, think how dull it's been for me!"

"My dear little man," said the dragon solemnly, "just understand, once for all, that I can't fight and I won't fight. I've never fought in my life, and I'm not going to begin now, just to give you a Roman holiday. In old days I always let the other fellows—the *earnest* fellows—do all the fighting, and no doubt that's why I have the pleasure of being here now."

"But if you don't fight he'll cut your head off!" gasped the Boy, miserable at the prospect of losing both his fight and his friend.

"Oh, I think not," said the dragon in his lazy way. "You'll be able to arrange something. I've every confidence in you, you're such a *manager*. Just run down, there's a dear chap, and make it all right. I leave it entirely to you."

The Boy made his way back to the village in a state of great despondency. First of all, there wasn't going to be any fight; next, his dear and honoured friend the dragon hadn't shown up in quite such a heroic light as he would have liked; and lastly, whether the dragon was a hero at heart or not, it made no difference, for St. George would most undoubtedly cut his head off. "Arrange things indeed!" he said bitterly to himself. "The dragon treats the whole affair as if it was an invitation to tea and croquet."

The villagers were straggling homewards as he passed

up the street, all of them in the highest spirits, and gleefully discussing the splendid fight that was in store. The Boy pursued his way to the inn, and passed into the principal chamber, where St. George now sat alone, musing over the chances of the fight, and the sad stories of rapine and of wrong that had so lately been poured into his sympathetic ears.

"May I come in, St. George?" said the Boy politely, as he paused at the door. "I want to talk to you about this little matter of the dragon, if you're not tired of it by this time."

"Yes, come in, Boy," said the Saint kindly. "Another tale of misery and wrong, I fear me. Is it a kind parent, then, of whom the tyrant has bereft you? Or some tender sister or brother? Well, it shall soon be avenged."

"Nothing of the sort," said the Boy. "There's a misunderstanding somewhere, and I want to put it right. The fact is, this is a *good* dragon."

"Exactly," said St. George, smiling pleasantly, "I quite understand. A good *dragon*. Believe me, I do not in the least regret that he is an adversary worthy of my steel, and no feeble specimen of his noxious tribe."

"But he's *not* a noxious tribe," cried the Boy distressedly. "Oh dear, oh dear, how *stupid* men are when they get an idea into their heads! I tell you he's a *good* dragon, and a friend of mine, and tells me the most beautiful stories you ever heard, all about old times and when he was little. And he's been so kind to mother, and mother'd do anything for him. And father likes him too, though father doesn't hold with art and poetry much, and always falls asleep when the dragon starts talking about *style*. But the fact is, nobody can help liking him when once they know him. He's so engaging and so trustful, and as simple as a child!"

"Sit down, and draw your chair up," said St. George. "I like a fellow who sticks up for his friends, and I'm sure the dragon has his good points, if he's got a friend like you. But that's not the question. All this evening I've been listening, with grief and anguish unspeakable, to tales of

murder, theft, and wrong ; rather too highly coloured, perhaps, not always quite convincing, but forming in the main a most serious roll of crime. History teaches us that the greatest rascals often possess all the domestic virtues ; and I fear that your cultivated friend, in spite of the qualities which have won (and rightly) your regard, has got to be speedily exterminated."

"Oh, you've been taking in all the yarns those fellows have been telling you," said the Boy impatiently. "Why, our villagers are the biggest story-tellers in all the country round. It's a known fact. You're a stranger in these parts, or else you'd have heard it already. All they want is a *fight*. They're the most awful beggars for getting up fights—it's meat and drink to them. Dogs, bulls, dragons—anything so long as it's a fight. Why, they've got a poor innocent badger in the stable behind here, at this moment. They were going to have some fun with him to-day, but they're saving him up now till *your* little affair's over. And I've no doubt they've been telling you what a hero you were, and how you were bound to win, in the cause of right and justice, and so on ; but let me tell you, I came down the street just now, and they were betting six to four on the dragon freely !"

"Six to four on the dragon !" murmured St. George sadly, resting his cheek on his hand. "This is an evil world, and sometimes I begin to think that all the wickedness in it is not entirely bottled up inside the dragons. And yet—may not this wily beast have misled you as to his real character, in order that your good report of him may serve as a cloak for his evil deeds ? Nay, may there not be, at this very moment, some hapless Princess immured within yonder gloomy cavern ?"

The moment he had spoken, St. George was sorry for what he had said, the Boy looked so genuinely distressed.

"I assure you, St. George," he said earnestly, "there's nothing of the sort in the cave at all. The dragon's a real gentleman, every inch of him, and I may say that no one would be more shocked and grieved than he would, at



hearing you talk in that—that *loose* way about matters on which he has very strong views ! ”

“ Well, perhaps I’ve been over-credulous,” said St. George. “ Perhaps I’ve misjudged the animal. But what are we to do ? Here are the dragon and I, almost face to face, each supposed to be thirsting for each other’s blood. I don’t see any way out of it, exactly. What do you suggest ? Can’t you arrange things, somehow ? ”

“ That’s just what the dragon said,” replied the Boy, rather nettled. “ Really, the way you two seem to leave everything to me—I suppose you couldn’t be persuaded to go away quietly, could you ? ”

“ Impossible, I fear,” said the Saint “ Quite against the rules. *You* know that as well as I do.”

“ Well, then, look here,” said the Boy, “ it’s early yet—would you mind strolling up with me and seeing the dragon and talking it over ? It’s not far, and any friend of mine will be most welcome.”

“ Well, it’s *irregular*,” said St. George, rising, “ but really it seems about the most sensible thing to do. You’re taking a lot of trouble on your friend’s account,” he added good-naturedly, as they passed out through the door together. “ But cheer up ! Perhaps there won’t have to be any fight after all.”

“ Oh, but I hope there will, though ! ” replied the little fellow wistfully.

“ I’ve brought a friend to see you, dragon,” said the Boy rather loud.

The dragon woke up with a start. “ I was just—er—thinking about things,” he said in his simple way. “ Very pleased to make your acquaintance, sir. Charming weather we’re having ! ”

“ This is St. George,” said the Boy, shortly. “ St. George, let me introduce you to the dragon. We’ve come up to talk things over quietly, dragon, and now for goodness’ sake do let us have a little straight common sense, and come to some practical business-like arrangement, for I’m sick

of views and theories of life and personal tendencies, and all that sort of thing. I may perhaps add that my mother's sitting up."

"So glad to meet you, St. George," began the dragon rather nervously, "because you've been a great traveller, I hear, and I've always been rather a stay-at-home. But I can show you many antiquities, many interesting features of our country-side, if you're stopping here any time——"

"I think," said St. George in his frank, pleasant way, "that we'd really better take the advice of our young friend here, and try to come to some understanding, on a business footing, about this little affair of ours. Now don't you think that after all the simplest plan would be just to fight it out, according to the rules, and let the best man win? They're betting on you, I may tell you, down in the village, but I don't mind that!"

"Oh, yes, *do*, dragon," said the Boy delightedly; "it'll save such a lot of bother!"

"My young friend, you shut up," said the dragon severely. "Believe me, St. George," he went on, "there's nobody in the world I'd sooner oblige than you and this young gentleman here. But the whole thing's nonsense, and conventionality, and popular thick-headedness. There's absolutely nothing to fight about, from beginning to end. And anyhow I'm not going to, so that settles it!"

"But supposing I make you?" said St. George, rather nettled.

"You can't," said the dragon triumphantly. "I should only go into my cave and retire for a time down the hole I came up. You'd soon get heartily sick of sitting outside and waiting for me to come out and fight you. And as soon as you'd really gone away, why, I'd come up again gaily, for I tell you frankly, I like this place, and I'm going to stay here!"

St. George gazed for a while on the fair landscape around them. "But this would be a beautiful place for a fight," he began again persuasively. "These great bare rolling Downs for the arena—and me in my golden armour

showing up against your big blue scaly coils ! Think what a picture it would make ! ”

“ Now you’re trying to get at me through my artistic sensibilities,” said the dragon. “ But it won’t work. Not but what it would make a very pretty picture, as you say,” he added, wavering a little.

“ We seem to be getting rather nearer to *business*,” put in the Boy. “ You must see, dragon, that there’s got to be a fight of some sort, ’cos you can’t want to have to go down that dirty old hole again and stop there till goodness knows when.”

“ It might be arranged,” said St. George thoughtfully. “ I *must* spear you somewhere, of course, but I’m not bound to hurt you very much. There’s such a lot of you that there must be a few *spare* places somewhere. Here, for instance, just behind your foreleg. It couldn’t hurt you much, just here ! ”

“ Now you’re tickling, George,” said the dragon coyly. “ No, that place won’t do at all. Even if it didn’t hurt—and I’m sure it would, awfully—it would make me laugh, and that would spoil everything ”

“ Let’s try somewhere else, then,” said St. George patiently. “ Under your neck, for instance—all these folds of thick skin,—if I speared you here you’d never even know I’d done it ! ”

“ Yes, but are you sure you can hit off the right place ? ” asked the dragon anxiously.

“ Of course I am,” said St. George, with confidence. “ You leave that to me ! ”

“ It’s just because I’ve *got* to leave it to you that I’m asking,” replied the dragon rather testily. “ No doubt you would deeply regret any error you might make in the hurry of the moment ; but you wouldn’t regret it half as much as I should ! However, I suppose we’ve got to trust somebody, as we go through life, and your plan seems, on the whole, as good a one as any.”

“ Look here, dragon,” interrupted the Boy, a little jealous on behalf of his friend, who seemed to be getting all the

worst of the bargain : " I don't quite see where *you* come in ! There's to be a fight, apparently, and you're to be licked ; and what I want to know is, what are *you* going to get out of it ? "

" St. George," said the dragon, " just tell him, please—what will happen after I'm vanquished in the deadly combat ? "

" Well, according to the rules I suppose I shall lead you in triumph down to the market-place or whatever answers to it," said St. George.

" Precisely," said the dragon " And then——? "

" And then there'll be shoutings and speeches and things," continued St. George " And I shall explain that you're converted, and see the error of your ways, and so on."

" Quite so," said the dragon. " And then——? "

" Oh, and then——" said St. George, " why, and then there will be the usual banquet, I suppose."

" Exactly," said the dragon ; " and that's where *I* come in. Look here," he continued, addressing the Boy, " I'm bored to death up here, and no one really appreciates me. I'm going into Society, I am, through the kindly aid of our friend here, who's taking such a lot of trouble on my account ; and you'll find I've got all the qualities to endear me to people who entertain ! So now that's all settled, and if you don't mind—I'm an old-fashioned fellow—don't want to turn you out, but——"

" Remember, you'll have to do your proper share of the fighting, dragon !" said St. George, as he took the hint and rose to go ; " I mean ramping, and breathing fire, and so on ! "

" I can *ramp* all right," replied the dragon confidently ; " as to breathing fire, it's surprising how easily one gets out of practice ; but I'll do the best I can. Good night ! "

They had descended the hill and were almost back in the village again, when St. George stopped short. "*Knew* I had forgotten something," he said. " There ought to be

a Princess. Terror-stricken and chained to a rock, and all that sort of thing Boy, can't you arrange a Princess ? ”

The Boy was in the middle of a tremendous yawn. “ I'm tired to death,” he wailed, “ and I *can't* arrange a Princess, or anything more, at this time of night. And my mother's sitting up, and *do* stop asking me to arrange more things till to-morrow ! ”

Next morning the people began streaming up to the Downs at quite an early hour, in their Sunday clothes and carrying baskets with bottle-necks sticking out of them, every one intent on securing good places for the combat. This was not exactly a simple matter, for of course it was quite possible that the dragon might win, and in that case even those who had put their money on him felt they could hardly expect him to deal with his backers on a different footing to the rest. Places were chosen, therefore, with circumspection and with a view to a speedy retreat in case of emergency ; and the front rank was mostly composed of boys who had escaped from parental control and now sprawled and rolled about on the grass, regardless of the shrill threats and warnings discharged at them by their anxious mothers behind.

The Boy had secured a good front place, well up towards the cave, and was feeling as anxious as a stage-manager on a first night. Could the dragon be depended upon ? He might change his mind and vote the whole performance rot ; or else, seeing that the affair had been so hastily planned, without even a rehearsal, he might be too nervous to show up. The Boy looked narrowly at the cave, but it showed no sign of life or occupation. Could the dragon have made a moonlight flitting ?

The higher portions of the ground were now black with sightseers, and presently a sound of cheering and a waving of handkerchiefs told that something was visible to them which the Boy, far up towards the dragon-end of the line as he was, could not yet see. A minute more and St. George's red plumes topped the hill, as the Saint rode slowly forth on the great level space which stretched up to

the grim mouth of the cave. Very gallant and beautiful he looked on his tall war-horse, his golden armour glancing in the sun, his great spear held erect, the little white pennon, crimson-crossed, fluttering at its point. He drew rein and remained motionless. The lines of spectators began to give back a little, nervously ; and even the boys in front stopped pulling hair and cuffing each other, and leaned forward expectant.

"Now then, dragon !" muttered the Boy impatiently, fidgeting where he sat. He need not have distressed himself, had he only known. The dramatic possibilities of the thing had tickled the dragon immensely, and he had been up from an early hour, preparing for his first public appearance with as much heartiness as if the years had run backwards, and he had been again a little dragonlet, playing with his sisters on the floor of their mother's cave, at the game of saints-and-dragons, in which the dragon was bound to win.

A low muttering, mingled with snorts, now made itself heard ; rising to a bellowing roar that seemed to fill the plain. Then a cloud of smoke obscured the mouth of the cave, and out of the midst of it the dragon himself, shining, sea-blue, magnificent, pranced splendidly forth ; and everybody said, "Oo-oo-oo !" as if he had been a mighty rocket ! His scales were glittering, his long spiky tail lashed his sides, his claws tore up the turf and sent it flying high over his back, and smoke and fire incessantly jetted from his angry nostrils. "Oh, well done, dragon !" cried the Boy excitedly. "Didn't think he had it in him !" he added to himself.

St. George lowered his spear, bent his head, dug his heels into his horse's sides, and came thundering over the turf. The dragon charged with a roar and a squeal,—a great blue whirling combination of coils and snorts and clashing jaws and spikes and fire.

"Missed !" yelled the crowd. There was a moment's entanglement of golden armour and blue-green coils and spiky tail, and then the great horse, tearing at his bit,

carried the Saint, his spear swung high in the air, almost up to the mouth of the cave.

The dragon sat down and barked viciously, while St. George with difficulty pulled his horse round into position.

"End of Round One!" thought the Boy. "How well they managed it! But I hope the Saint won't get excited. I can trust the dragon all right. What a regular play-actor the fellow is!"

St. George had at last prevailed on his horse to stand steady and was looking round him as he wiped his brow. Catching sight of the Boy, he smiled and nodded, and held up three fingers for an instant.

"It seems to be all planned out," said the Boy to himself. "Round Three is to be the finishing one, evidently. Wish it could have lasted a bit longer. Whatever's that old fool of a dragon up to now?"

The dragon was employing the interval in giving a ramping performance for the benefit of the crowd. Ramping, it should be explained, consists in running round and round in a wide circle, and sending waves and ripples of movement along the whole length of your spine, from your pointed ears right down to the spike at the end of your long tail. When you are covered with blue scales, the effect is particularly pleasing; and the Boy recollected the dragon's recently expressed wish to become a social success.

St. George now gathered up his reins and began to move forward, dropping the point of his spear and settling himself firmly in the saddle.

"Time!" yelled everybody excitedly; and the dragon, leaving off his ramping, sat up on end, and began to leap from one side to the other with huge ungainly bounds, whooping like a Red Indian. This naturally disconcerted the horse, who swerved violently, the Saint only just saving himself by the mane; and as they shot past the dragon delivered a vicious snap at the horse's tail which sent the poor beast careering madly far over the Downs, so that the language of the Saint, who had lost a stirrup, was fortunately inaudible to the general assemblage.

Round Two evoked audible evidence of friendly feeling towards the dragon. The spectators were not slow to appreciate a combatant who could hold his own so well and clearly wanted to show good sport ; and many encouraging remarks reached the ears of our friend as he strutted to and fro, his chest thrust out and his tail in the air, hugely enjoying his new popularity.

St. George had dismounted and was tightening his girths, and telling his horse, with quite an Oriental flow of imagery, exactly what he thought of him, and his relations, and his conduct on the present occasion ; so the Boy made his way down to the Saint's end of the line, and held his spear for him.

"It's been a jolly fight, St. George !" he said, with a sigh. "Can't you let it last a bit longer ?"

"Well, I think I'd better not," replied the Saint. "The fact is, your simple-minded old friend's getting conceited, now they've begun cheering him, and he'll forget all about the arrangement and take to playing the fool, and there's no telling where he would stop. I'll just finish him off this round."

He swung himself into the saddle and took his spear from the Boy. "Now don't you be afraid," he added kindly. "I've marked my spot exactly, and *he's* sure to give me all the assistance in his power, because he knows it's his only chance of being asked to the banquet !"

St. George now shortened his spear, bringing the butt well up under his arm ; and, instead of galloping as before, trotted smartly towards the dragon, who crouched at his approach, flicking his tail till it cracked in the air like a great cart-whip. The Saint wheeled as he neared his opponent and circled warily round him, keeping his eye on the spare place ; while the dragon, adopting similar tactics, paced with caution round the same circle, occasionally feinting with his head. So the two sparred for an opening, while the spectators maintained a breathless silence.

Though the round lasted for some minutes, the end was so swift that all the Boy saw was a lightning movement



of the Saint's arm, and then a whirl and a confusion of spines, claws, tail, and flying bits of turf. The dust cleared away, the spectators whooped and ran in cheering, and the Boy made out that the dragon was down, pinned to the earth by the spear, while St. George had dismounted, and stood astride of him.

It all seemed so genuine that the Boy ran in breathlessly, hoping the dear old dragon wasn't really hurt. As he approached, the dragon lifted one large eyelid, winked solemnly, and collapsed again. He was held fast to earth by the neck, but the Saint had hit him in the spare place agreed upon, and it didn't even seem to tickle.

"Bain't you goin' to cut 'is 'ed orf, master?" asked one of the applauding crowd. He had backed the dragon, and naturally felt a trifle sore.

"Well, not *to-day*, I think," replied St. George pleasantly. "You see, that can be done at *any* time. There's no hurry at all. I think we'll all go down to the village first, and have some refreshment, and then I'll give him a good talking-to, and you'll find he'll be a very different dragon!"

At that magic word *refreshment* the whole crowd formed up in procession and silently awaited the signal to start. The time for talking and cheering and betting was past, the hour for action had arrived. St. George, hauling on his spear with both hands, released the dragon, who rose and shook himself and ran his eye over his spikes and scales and things, to see that they were all in order. Then the Saint mounted and led off the procession, the dragon following meekly in the company of the Boy, while the thirsty spectators kept at a respectful interval behind.

There were great doings when they got down to the village again, and had formed up in front of the inn. After refreshment St. George made a speech, in which he informed his audience that he had removed their direful scourge, at a great deal of trouble and inconvenience to himself, and now they weren't to go about grumbling and fancying they'd got grievances, because they hadn't. And they shouldn't be so fond of fights, because next time they

might have to do the fighting themselves, which would not be the same thing at all. And there was a certain badger in the inn stables which had got to be released at once, and he'd come and see it done himself. Then he told them that the dragon had been thinking over things, and saw that there were two sides to every question, and he wasn't going to do it any more, and if they were good perhaps he'd stay and settle down there. So they must make friends, and not be prejudiced, and go about fancying they knew everything there was to be known, because they didn't, not by a long way. And he warned them against the sin of romancing, and making up stories and fancying other people would believe them just because they were plausible and highly-coloured. Then he sat down, amidst much repentant cheering, and the dragon nudged the Boy in the ribs and whispered that he couldn't have done it better himself. Then every one went off to get ready for the banquet.

Banquets are always pleasant things, consisting mostly, as they do, of eating and drinking ; but the specially nice thing about a banquet is, that it comes when something's over, and there's nothing more to worry about, and to-morrow seems a long way off. St. George was happy because there had been a fight and he hadn't had to kill anybody ; for he didn't really like killing, though he generally had to do it. The dragon was happy because there had been a fight, and so far from being hurt in it he had won popularity and a sure footing in society. The Boy was happy because there had been a fight, and in spite of it all his two friends were on the best of terms. And all the others were happy because there had been a fight, and—well, they didn't require any other reasons for their happiness. The dragon exerted himself to say the right thing to everybody, and proved the life and soul of the evening ; while the Saint and the Boy, as they looked on, felt that they were only assisting at a feast of which the honour and the glory were entirely the dragon's. But they didn't mind that, being good fellows, and the dragon was

not in the least proud or forgetful. On the contrary, every ten minutes or so he leant over towards the Boy and said impressively : " Look here ! you *will* see me home afterwards, won't you ? " And the Boy always nodded, though he had promised his mother not to be out late.

At last the banquet was over, the guests had dropped away with many good nights and congratulations and invitations, and the dragon, who had seen the last of them off the premises, emerged into the street followed by the Boy, wiped his brow, sighed, sat down in the road and gazed at the stars. " Jolly night it's been ! " he murmured. " Jolly stars ! Jolly little place this ! Think I shall just stop here. Don't feel like climbing up any beastly hill. Boy's promised to see me home Boy had better do it then ! No responsibility on my part. Responsibility all Boy's ! " And his chin sank on his broad chest and he slumbered peacefully.

" Oh, *get up*, dragon," cried the Boy piteously. " You *know* my mother's sitting up, and I'm so tired, and you made me promise to see you home, and I never knew what it meant or I wouldn't have done it ! " And the Boy sat down in the road by the side of the sleeping dragon, and cried.

The door behind them opened, a stream of light illumined the road, and St. George, who had come out for a stroll in the cool night-air, caught sight of the two figures sitting there—the great motionless dragon and the tearful little Boy.

" What's the matter, Boy ? " he inquired kindly, stepping to his side.

" Oh, it's this great lumbering *pig* of a dragon ! " sobbed the Boy. " First he makes me promise to see him home, and then he says I'd better do it, and goes to sleep ! Might as well try to see a *haystack* home ! And I'm so tired, and mother's——" Here he broke down again.

" Now don't take on," said St. George. " I'll stand by you, and we'll *both* see him home. Wake up, dragon ! " he said sharply, shaking the beast by the elbow.

The dragon looked up sleepily. "What a night, George!" he murmured; "what a——"

"Now look here, dragon," said the Saint firmly. "Here's this little fellow waiting to see you home, and you *know* he ought to have been in bed these two hours, and what his mother'll say I don't know, and anybody but a selfish pig would have *made* him go to bed long ago——"

"And he *shall* go to bed!" cried the dragon, starting up. "Poor little chap, only fancy his being up at this hour! It's a shame, that's what it is, and I don't think, St. George, you've been very considerate—but come along at once, and don't let us have any more arguing or shilly-shallying. You give me hold of your hand, Boy—thank you, George, an arm up the hill is just what I wanted!"

So they set off up the hill arm-in-arm, the Saint, the Dragon, and the Boy. The lights in the little village began to go out; but there were stars, and a late moon, as they climbed to the Downs together. And, as they turned the last corner and disappeared from view, snatches of an old song were borne back on the night-breeze. I can't be certain which of them was singing, but I *think* it was the Dragon!

"Here we are at your gate," said the man abruptly, laying his hand on it. "Good night. Cut along in sharp, or you'll catch it!"

Could it really be our own gate? Yes, there it was, sure enough, with the familiar marks on its bottom bar made by our feet when we swung on it.

"Oh, but wait a minute!" cried Charlotte. "I want to know a heap of things. Did the dragon really settle down? And did——"

"There isn't any more of that story," said the man, kindly but firmly. "At least, not to-night. Now be off! Good-bye!"

"Wonder if it's all true?" said Charlotte, as we hurried up the path. "Sounded dreadfully like nonsense, in parts!"

" P'raps it's true for all that," I replied encouragingly.

Charlotte bolted in like a rabbit, out of the cold and the dark ; but I lingered a moment in the still, frosty air, for a backward glance at the silent white world without, ere I changed it for the land of firelight and cushions and laughter. It was the day for choir-practice, and carol-time was at hand, and a belated member was passing home-wards down the road, singing as he went :

*" Then St George es made rev'rence in the stable so dym,  
Oo vanquished the dragon so fearful and grim  
So-o grim and so-o fierce that now may we say  
All peaceful is our wakin' , on Chri-istmas Day ! "*

The singer receded, the carol died away. But I wondered, with my hand on the door-latch, whether that was the song, or something like it, that the dragon sang as he toddled contentedly up the hill.

